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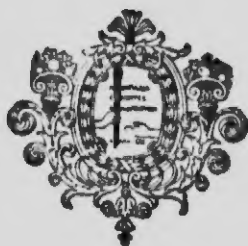
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# THE PROBATIONER

AND OTHER STORIES

BY  
HERMAN WHITAKER



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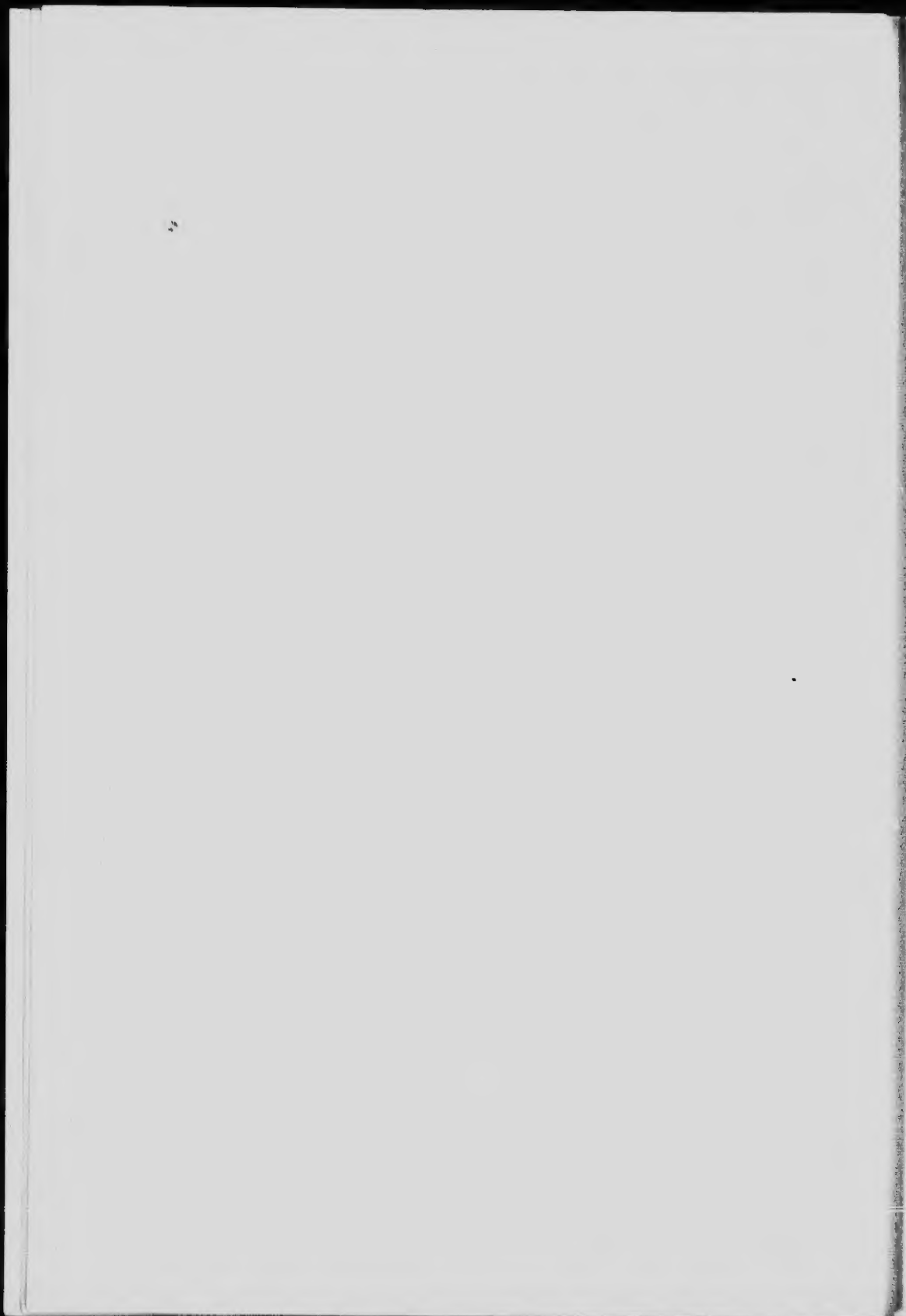
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TO MY FRIEND  
HALVOR HAUCH



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THE PROBATIONER



## THE PROBATIONER

### I

PULLING up his ponies on the crest of a long divide, Jake Mattheson extended his whip and growled:

"Yon's the school. Thar's where we hold meeting."

The minister who sat beside him shivered as he looked down on the wintry land. A twenty-mile wind plus sixty degrees of frost is not productive of warmth, and the bitter prospect added a chill to their rigors. All about them clumps of ragged poplar blotched the whiteness. Far off a range of hills thrust scrub-crowned peaks against a livid sky; the snowy trees were lifeless. In the east a sad spruce forest blackly loomed. Over all brooded the silence.

The vastness of it all, the solitude, the blanched, far-reaching desolation, awed and oppressed the



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young man. It was so different from the smug, road-ruled Eastern townships. Hard, cruel, brutal, its utter savagery repelled the eye and sickened the soul.

"Settlement's behind the ridge," Jake added. "See it in five minutes. Git up, thar!"

In less than the specified time the minister—student, rather, for he was not yet ordained—looked down on the pastorate to which he had been called on probation. Its appearance was not inspiring. Over a wide range of rolling prairie a score or so of shanties were thinly scattered. Rude they all were—some built of sod, others of rough, unhewn logs. Only one or two boasted a second story; and, to offset the pretensions of these, still others were simply mounds of straw threshed over loose pole frames. Grim, inhospitable-looking, they stood amid unfenced fields, their spurting columns of wood smoke alone suggesting a note of cheer.

"Looks homesome, don't it?" the driver said. "Cold? Shore! We'll soon be thar."

Glancing quickly up, the student saw that a smile was softening the lines of the man's grim visage. Amazed, he tried to think what in that bleak prospect could call forth a touch of feeling, and wondered if he, too, would some day come to

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love it. It did not seem possible. Stern and forbidding, the land frowned upon him in its coldness.

So steeped was he in this mood that he took no heed of the trail. Scrub, bluff, and snowy waste passed by in dim procession until a shout, a crash, and the sudden impact of his own body against the dashboard effectually aroused him.

Turning quickly about a bluff, they had run into a mounted man and just missed a girl who rode behind him. When the student recovered and looked around, the man was pinned in the deep snow beneath his beast, while the girl sat her bronco and looked on with an expression of half amusement, half concern.

"Jake," yelled the fallen man, "kain't you give me a hand?"

But Jake's bronco were showing what a Western pony can do in the line of kicking when he humps himself, and Jake said so in terms that were anything but polite. Uttering an oath, the young fellow continued his struggles until the student jumped from the sleigh and raised the fallen beast. Then growling surly thanks, he rose and dusted the snow from his moose-skin coat.

"Jake," he growled, "I'll take up a subscription

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to buy you a string o' bells. You came round thet bluff slick as death."

A contemptuous grin wrinkled the settler's gnarled front. "Yer ears is long enough," he snarled. "Put the gal ahead nex' time, McCloud. She ain't deaf."

Flushing angrily, the young fellow made a sharp retort, which the settler answered. While they were exchanging personal opinions, the student took note of the girl. She was surveying his clerical garb with a half-curious, half-quizzical glance. At first he had taken her for a boy, for she rode astride, Western fashion, and her long hair was coiled beneath her cap; but the small waist, large eyes, and unmistakably feminine hips quickly undeceived him. Pretty, he thought, turning his eyes from her short riding-skirt, but—so bold! No women of his acquaintance ever rode that way.

"Wal," finished Mattheson, "I kain't stop to bandy words with no fool idgit. Git up, thar! Who is he?" Jake answered to his companion when the ponies were once more flying along the trail. "Ye'll find out soon enough. Him an' thet gal hev kept us out of a minister for more'n half a year. Her name's Walton, Ruth Walton, an' she's the derndest little minx west o' Winnipeg. Why," he

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ejaculated, slapping his thigh, "she jest runs the vestry." Then, with a rueful grin that yet contained an element of pride, he told how she had driven the three probationers back to the haunts of men.

"The first," he said, "was a right smart chap—you should hev seen him spank the Bible; but Ruth took a mislikin' to his hair. Said it was too straight, an'—well, he hed to go." The student blushed as he remembered that his call had contained the rather unusual request for a photograph and a snip of his hair. "Yes," Jake repeated, "he hed to go, for Ruth raised the boys agin 'im an' made his place hotter 'n blazes. The next chap," he mused, pulling out and biting off nearly half a plug of tobacco, "was a lettle too pale in the gills for her taste—didn't care much 'bout him; but the third was a jim dandy. Licked two of the boys, an' put some backbone in the vestry. Thought we was agoin' to keep him, but"—he sighed—"man thet is born of weemen is small pertaters an' few in a hill. The derved fool hed to go an' fall in love with Ruth. Thet fixed him. She made such a show of the critter thet we fired him slick. She 'lowed," the settler finished, as the ponies pulled up in front of his door, "thet you was a likely-lookin' chap.

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But, Lordy," he dubiously added, "there's no tellin'. You hain't got the beef o' the last chap, an' the boys might notion to hustle you theirselves. Mr. Ritchie, wife," he said to the feminine duplicate of himself who just then opened the door. "He's agoin' to board with us. Hustle supper."

## II

THE remainder of that week the new minister spent in making house-to-house calls. and everywhere he went he heard more of Ruth and her tricks. She was, he learned, an only daughter, the child of an English settler of whom little was known save that his speech and bearing proclaimed him of good family—such are plenty in the Northland, whose vast womb lends itself to the burying of secrets. Of her mother still less was known, but one or two who had seen the portrait which hung in her father's room said that Ruth came honestly by her beauty.

Yet, despite her ancestry, Ruth was a child of the plains. Motherless at three, she grew up free as the Northern air, unconventional as the wide plains, saucy as a blackbird. She was a thorn in the side of the settlement preachers, the dollars of whose

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salary numbered less than the pains she inflicted upon them.

One Sunday she came to church clad in a décolleté gown which she had fished from her dead mother's belongings, and so horrified the preacher that he broke down in his sermon. Another time she surreptitiously conveyed cigars into meeting and helped the boys to smoke them. She had played dancing tunes on the church organ after a Sabbath service, and offered the minister the loan of a yellow-backed novel. All these things and many others, with additions, subtractions, surmises, and suggestions, were poured into the young minister's ears by shrewd mothers of marriageable daughters, who also maintained that the things the girl had done were only a trifle less scandalous than those she had left undone. In view of which revelations the calm countenance the minister held at his first meeting covered a fair degree of nervousness.

The attendance was large at that meeting. On the school benches were crowded the settlers from twenty miles around — long, lean men, angular women, and young girls from whose tender bones hard work and harder fare had worn the flesh. In the latter, youth constituted the sole claim to beauty; and as the minister mentally compared their washed-

■

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out prettiness with the rich bloom of the girl he met on the trail, he easily divined the source of her power over the vestry. As always, its members had paid conscious or unconscious tribute to the strongest influence which can be brought to bear upon their sex.

As he rose from silent prayer, he found himself looking into her face. She was sitting on the front bench, almost within reach of his hand. In her eyes was the quizzical look of their first meeting, only to it she had added a touch of insolence. As their eyes met, she turned and whispered to McCloud, who sat beside her:

ot quite up to sample."

At that as it was, the minister heard, and the girl saw that he heard. She saw him flush, and noted with secret admiration the swift tightening of the lips that controlled the sudden pulse and turned his face to stone. In the brief glance that flashed between them, each read consciousness of the situation and answered the other's challenge. Rising, the minister proceeded with the service.

After the hymns he preached a sermon suited to his hearers, using common words, freely illustrating, strictly avoiding metaphor and tricks of rhetoric. And as he warmed to his work he forgot Ruth,

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McCloud, and the staring, curious settlers. He saw only a great impersonality that embodied sin, unhappiness, and all the ills that man is heir to. At this he preached, counselling, advising, exhorting, explaining, laying down an earnest, practical rule of life. As he talked, curiosity waned and gave place to an eager, breathless interest. Leaning forward, the people took the words from his lips; and when, at the end of an hour he closed the Bible, a heavy sigh paid him the tribute of suspended breath.

Now that his eyes were once more free, they drew naturally to the front bench. Ruth was looking coldly indifferent. He had not seen her attempts at calm abstraction while he was preaching, nor the flushing color which marked her failure. Sighing, he rose and pronounced the benediction.

While the minister exchanged greetings with their wives and daughters, the vestry-men discussed his merits in the stable. Jake Mattheson—who was boarding the minister, and therefore was biased in his opinions—opined that there were “no ‘tater-bugs crawlin’ on him.” Si, Jake’s brother and the biggest man in the settlement, endorsed the verdict in a voice of thunder. Old Jemmy Hodges, a weazened stick of a man, thought in a high squeal that the preaching sampled well, but cast his vote for a



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married minister. He always had maintained that none but a woman could put kinking-straps on Ruth. Of this Si Mattheson was not so sure; anyway, he was in favor of giving the lad a show. If he did the job—well; if not, then they could call a married man.

"Let him fight his fight," Si finished; "an' if he wins out, I'm for callin' him for keeps."

"So're we!" chorused the others.

For the next month that fight went on in rather desultory style. The boys were feeling their man. Apart from a little giggling in meeting, and one or two attempts to be funny at the minister's expense, they had not committed themselves. And before these preliminary skirmishes developed into anything serious a furious storm burst over the settlement and winter closed down with the snap of a trap.

It was the hardest season in thirty years—seven white months, a yard of snow on the level, and a mean temperature of thirty-five below. Smoke columns, ascending from amid huge drifts, marked the sites of buried cabins. Landmarks were obliterated, and twenty feet of snow banked in the bluffs. Travel, except on well-beaten roads, was almost impossible, and social life—meagre at the best of

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times—languished. To give this a fillip, and to break the monotony of existence, Ritchie enlisted the aid of such young folk as possessed talent, and got up a Christmas entertainment that was to be long remembered because of certain numbers which did not appear on the programme.

On the night of the social he found Si Mattheson waiting for him outside the school.

"There's agoin' to be trouble," Si said, in a rumbling whisper. "The boys hev a keg in the stable, an' they've been hittin' it hard."

Ritchie heard in silence. He looked at the school. Out of the darkness its windows punched warm squares of light, through the open door floated laughter and the hum of voices. Above him, millions of cold stars gemmed the void. The north-wester breathed an icy breath. Across the north Aurora Borealis waved her shimmering veils of fire. He shivered. Chicken-hearted, Si wondered?

"Where is that keg?" Ritchie suddenly inquired.

"Tucked on top o' the roof-logs."

Turning, the minister vanished in the darkness. Si heard the stable door open, and just about the time his slow wits began to comprehend the minister's purpose there came a crash, a splash, and a strong spirituous smell drifted down the wind. Si

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gasped, and before he recovered his normal poise the minister's voice sounded close beside him.

"Come along," he said. "The people are waiting."

North, south, east, and west, every trail had poured the settlers into the school-house. It was crammed—men, women, and children packed the benches and lined the walls. In the far corner a score of young men herded together; half of these were Canadians, and the remainder either English "remittance-men" or Barnardo boys, grafts of the London slums transplanted to a sterner and healthier soil. Their flushed faces proclaimed the owners of the keg fully as much as their actions. They were playing rough jokes upon one another, and at the minister's entrance they set up a hoarse laugh.

In a glance Ritchie sized the situation; then, cool, calm, almost indifferent, he mounted the platform and gave out the first number. This, a quartet, the boys allowed to go by without interference, applauding vociferously at its close; but later in the evening they began to interject remarks, stamping to the music, doing their utmost to confuse the performers. At times they became positively uproarious, yet through it all the minister kept his head.

At the end of each number he rose, made some

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happy comment, announced the next number, and sat down unruffled.

"He's got nerve," Jake Mattheson whispered to Si.

"Takes muscle to hold this crowd," the latter pessimistically responded.

At last Ritchie stepped forward to give his own number—a humorous monologue. Coolly, as if enjoying perfect silence, he spoke the first few sentences. They could not be heard; still he held on, and soon, perhaps moved by curiosity, the disturbers abated their noise. Little by little it lessened until he had almost perfect order. It appeared as if he had won out; but just when he paused to emphasize a line, a jeer broke on the stillness.

A hush followed. The remark contained so vile an insult that even the corner refused to father it. The people in front turned sharply round, those in the rear looked sheepishly ahead; all were excited, only the minister maintained his coolness. He waited amid dead silence. He did not know the speaker, but there was no mistaking the accent; and just when the stillness was becoming oppressive he launched a retort that was sharper than a locust's thorn. Quick, apt, biting, it covered the principal

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failings of a remittance-man, and left a ripple of suggestion flowing in its wake.

A roar of laughter followed. Ritchie's retort was a master-stroke. It aroused instantly the fierce jealousy which obtains between Briton and Colonial, and set the corner by the ears. The Canadians joined in the laugh against their fellows, and kept good order until, just when the last number had been given out, a window suddenly flew up and a raucous voice roared:

"All hands to take a drink!"

Instantly the man nearest the window vaulted out; then, feet first, headlong, sideways, any way, just as their hurry and the press of thrusting hands permitted, Barnardo boys, Canadians, and remittance-men streamed after. When the last rolled over the sill, Ritchie rose to dismiss the meeting, but had scarcely spoken the last word when an angry yell rose on the outside, and a scurry of feet came back from the stable. A whisper passed around the room.

"He spilled their liquor, an' they're a layin' for him!"

The minister went on buttoning his gloves. Women glanced fearfully in his direction and whispered with their husbands, but these shook their heads. It was the minister's quarrel; if he couldn't hold his

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own he was no good in that settlement. Curious eyes turned on him as he strode towards the door.

As he passed out, his eye fell on Ruth Walton. Her face was a study of emotion—anger, fear, apprehension alternated in quick succession. Her eyes said stay, but her proud red mouth locked firmly on the words. In that strangely composite expression he read what he had to expect.

Smiling, he stepped outside. A late moon shed a flood of silver on the dark crowd surging about the door. Its many faces were black with anger, bitter with prejudice.

"Where you agoin'?" a voice growled, and a man stumbled heavily against him.

It was McCloud. Whirling quickly round, Ritchie struck with all his heart—a smart, clean blow that landed with a whiplike crack and drew a yell of fierce delight from the crowding men.

"He'll fight!" they howled. "Go in, Jim, an' give him fits!"

McCloud needed no prompting. Recovering from his surprise, he came with a rush; but, before he could strike, a heavy body split the ring; he was seized about the waist and hurled headlong in the snow.

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"Next!" Si Mattheson roared. "My night out! Next!"

The crack of the minister's fist had roused the fiercest fighting-blood in sixteen counties. The man was a berserk. His face gleamed white and stern, his eyes were steel rays, his huge figure loomed larger in the tender light.

"Next!" he shouted.

"This ain't your quarrel," a voice grumbled; then its owner fled precipitately to avoid the sudden clutch of the giant's hands.

"No one?" Si challenged, walking to and fro in the ring.

From the way the crowd shrank from his threatening fist he might have been a giant of old and they pygmies of the fable. One or two men on the edge of the ring slunk off to the stable. They had seen big Jim McCloud lifted and shot like a stone from a sling—that was enough. He was slowly extricating himself from the deep drift which had broken his fall. Curious faces peered from the school door. It was a dark picture, and the pallid moon framed it in gleaming silver.

"Look here, Mr. Mattheson," the minister said, laying a hand on the giant's arm, "I'm perfectly able to fight my own battles."

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"I believe you," Si rumbled, "but you don't have to when I'm around. Preachin's your lay. Come on now, won't you?"

But the ring scattered for the stable, from the shadow of which a voice yelled:

"You think you're smart, Si Mattheson, but we'll ketch him alone one o' these days!"

"You will, will you?" Si growled.

With the rush of a charging grizzly he swept down on the stable, but before he had covered half the ground a whip cracked and a double team dashed off down the trail. The sleigh was black with men, and as it flew along their savage yells came floating back. A minute and they were out of sight; then, one by one, the settlers hitched and followed.

"Thet was a right smart fillip you give McCloud," Jake Mattheson said to the minister as they drove home, "an' it served you well. Si'd sooner fight than eat, but he'd hev let the boys tear you in bits if you hedn't shown grit. They'll shorely lay for you," he added, comfortingly.

### III

AND doubtless they would have if opportunity had waited on inclination, but after Christmas an-



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other wild storm burst over the settlement. For ten days it raged without let, and, though it then eased for a single night, the next morning the wind veered southeast and blew a perfect gale. Storm followed storm in quick succession; for weeks the air was thick as a fleece, and the temperatures dropped below the record. In two months the mercury never once thawed, the spirit thermometers often read down to sixty-five below.

In the cabins meals froze on the table, meat was chopped with an axe for the pot, bread came hard as a brick from the box. Though one might keep from freezing, it was impossible to get warm. Men sat close up to red-hot stoves that were swallowing a cord of wood a day, and yet shivered with the cold at their backs. In that frozen purgatory passion languished, vendettas were laid aside, and petty jealousies dwarfed to their very seeds.

At the end of January the leaden sky was still feeding fat the drifts. One morning Ritchie sat in his little study under the gable of Jake Mattheson's house. The window was heavily frosted, but by breathing on a pane he had cleared a spot through which he presently spied a dark object laboring through the drift. A man was coming along the trail towards the house.

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Springing up, Ritchie ran down-stairs, and as he threw open the door Si Mattheson came stamping along the veranda. "Any o' you folks seen anythin' o' McCloud of late?" he asked. "There warn't no smoke comin' from his shanty this mornin'."

"Mebbe he's away," Jake suggested, looking up from his place by the stove.

Si shook his head. "Might hev been teaming wood," he allowed, "but thet don't count. His out trail goes by my door, an' there hain't been a track on it in three weeks. Better come along o' me an' see what's doin'."

"Wait a minute," said Ritchie, "and I'll go too."

McCloud, who was a bachelor, lived alone in a little log shanty a couple of miles to the north of Jake's; but, short as the distance was, it took the three men, spelling one another on the lead, two hours to make it—two hours of heart-breaking, wind-trying labor. About the shanty there was no sign of life. The wind whirled the flying scud drearily around its corners, the hissing drift flew by, a huge white mound banked the door to the very latch.

"Look's bad," Si muttered, as he kicked the cumbering snow aside; then, as he threw open the door, he whistled his astonishment.

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Inside, the cabin was completely gutted—flooring, rafters, bedstead, table, stools, everything inflammable was gone. The cold stove straddled two floor-joists. In the far corner, wrapped in his blankets, lay McCloud.

A week before he had run out of wood, and, taking advantage of a lull in the drift, he had gone to the bush to cut a load. He had to break new trail all the way, and it was late in the afternoon when he loaded on the last stick. Twice on the way home his load upset, and as he reloaded the last time the wind rose and walled him in circling clouds of snow. If it had held to the one quarter, he might have made his shanty; but presently the storm slewed to the east.

No team can face the raw east wind when it carries seventy degrees of frost. McCloud's oxen fell off before it. Towards evening he threw off his load and travelled light, hoping to strike some settler's cabin; but his team were headed away from the settled lands. Hours of tumultuous darkness ensued, during which he wandered like a lost soul in a black void. He felt himself freezing, but had no remedy until a merciful shift of wind turned his oxen home; and it was midnight when, with badly frozen feet, he crawled into his cabin.

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"Hed to hev a fire," he said, looking sheepishly at the minister, "an' for the las' five days I kept her agoin' with the fixin's. Burned 'em all," he added, with a wave of his hand. "Would hev started on the stable logs, but them plaguey feet hold me down."

While Jake and Si cut the stable mangers into stove wood, Ritchie examined McCloud's feet. In preparing for a frontier pastorate he had taken a course in medicine, and he saw at once that while the left foot might be saved, the right was hopelessly frozen. He saw also what this involved. As yet no railroad pierced those wilds. The nearest surgeon practised in Winnipeg, and between him and them lay two hundred miles of drifted trail. His decision was quickly made.

"I stay here," he said to Jake. "Send my things over as soon as possible."

Before they left, Si and Jake tore up the granary floor and laid it in the shanty, and after they were gone the minister knocked up a table and a set of stools. While he worked McCloud looked on, ashamed. Once or twice he shuffled uneasily, and at last that which was on his mind found expression.

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"Say," he burst out, "would it make you feel any better to lam me one in the eye? If it would, jes fire away."

When the minister laughingly refused, he seemed almost offended.

"Wal," he grumbled, "I thought as you might like to get even. Anyway, you hit me one good crack. Shucks, didn't I see stars!"

Through all the next week the minister carefully watched the injured members, hoping that nature might work a miracle; but when McCloud complained of dull pains in the knee and hip, he knew that the operation could no longer be deferred. Already he had gathered together such rude appliances as the settlement afforded, and now he calied in Si and Jake.

"Jim stood it well," Jake said, describing the operation to Jemmy Hodges; "but, Lord, man, I sickened, an' Si plumb fainted."

"An' the preacher?" Jemmy queried.

"Didn't like it no better than us, I reckon," Jake answered. "His face was white an' sot like stone, but he cut an' stitched, an' ketched up them art'ries skilful as a surgeon."

Jemmy allowed that they would stand some show of keeping the minister after this.

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Jake agreed with Jemmy, and said that the boys were swearing by him.

Jemmy dubiously suggested Ruth.

Jake reckoned that she couldn't do nothing without the boys, and reminded Jemmy that the minister hadn't begun on her yet.

"Ruther him nor me," finished Jemmy.

"Shore!" Jake agreed.

## IV

For a week after the operation McCloud did well; then, suddenly, blood poisoning set in. The news flashed through the settlement. For the first time since they had been snatching their bread from the hands of the cruel North, death's shadow loomed over the settlers, and now they pitted against it the sullen determination that had triumphed over frost and drought and creeping locust. One by one, through drift and blinding storm, they came to offer aid, and none came empty-handed. Each brought some rude comfort from his scanty store; but, while McCloud accepted these, he refused their help, saying quietly to Ritchie:

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"There's but one besides yourself as I'd like to hev about me."

"Who?" asked Ritchie.

"Ruth," he answered.

And as if in answer to his wish, she came that night. The minister was sitting by the bed, applying wet cloths to the patient's burning head, when a clash of bells sounded on the outside.

"Walton's!" McCloud exclaimed, sitting up. "He's the only man as owns a double string."

As he spoke the door opened on Ruth. On her fur coat frost diamonds sparkled, her face was flushed from the kiss of the breeze.

"All right, dad!" she called through the door. "Good-bye!" Then, walking over to the bed, she said: "I've come to nurse you, Jim."

"But," the minister began, slightly shocked at the novel situation. "But—"

"Oh, it's all right," she went on with calm confidence; "I've brought my blankets." Then, surveying him authoritatively, she added: "You're just worn out. Go and lie down."

"But—" he stammered.

"In that corner," she went on. "Here, you haven't half clothes enough. Take my coat and spread it over your blankets."

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Without further protest he obeyed, and had scarcely lain down before he was fast asleep.

When he awoke he stared about him. The cabin was transformed. While he slept Ruth had swept the floor, scrubbed the table, cleaned the lamp, which now shone resplendent, and given Jim's cooking-pans a needed scouring. Neat and clean herself, she was getting breakfast ready. A savory smell of frying bacon filled the cabin and mingled with the odors of coffee and cooking biscuit.

"Well!" the minister exclaimed. "You are a fairy godmother!"

"Looks homesome, don't it?" McCloud chuckled from the bed. "Her ekal ain't in the county."

Later, the minister came almost to believe it, for as her days of nursing dragged on to weeks Ruth developed wonderfully. The mother-love which lies dormant in every girl's heart came into full fruitage. She mothered them both, and though on occasion her maternal authority trenched on the bounds of tyranny, it was exercised in such a sweetly pretty way that slavery under her would have seemed an enviable condition. Other qualities, too, were expanding in the girl's nature. The robustness of soul that made her enemy to the milk-and-water type of preacher took no offence at



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Ritchie; and this first great requirement once satisfied, a natural and most feminine inclination towards refinement made her take pleasure in his society. They became fast friends, and their friendship was none the weaker because she had found that in most things he was much stronger than herself.

In moments when their patient balanced between life and death, she learned to look to Ritchie. One night, in particular, she never forgot. McCloud was nearing a crisis. Fever had stripped his strong bones of flesh until from sheer lack of fuel it had burned itself out; only his tremendous vitality kept him alive. He was lying motionless, scarce breathing, but suddenly, in the middle of the night, she heard him calling.

"Yes," she answered, bending over.

So faintly that she barely heard, he whispered: "Good-bye. I'm agoin'."

Pale, trembling, awed by this first glimpse of the end of life, she stood until Ritchie answered her sudden call. He found that the patient's hands were icy cold, chills were slowly crawling up his limbs; he was surely dying.

Stripping off his coat, the minister went to work.

"Rub his hands! Slap them!" he said, and the

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masterful tone gave her a sudden thrill and restored her courage. "Pour a little of this into his mouth."

He handed her the whiskey, while he rubbed the man's body with the fiery spirit. An hour passed, a second, a third, and all the while the faint spirit seemed to be slipping, slipping, slipping farther from its clay.

"It ain't no use," McCloud whispered once. "Let me go."

"Nonsense!" Ritchie exclaimed, looking him full in the face. "You'll live to ride the prairies many a day."

McCloud's eyes wandered to his face; Ruth, too, looked there for comfort, for she intuitively felt that death was hovering over them. It was the psychological moment when the attitude of a sick man's mind turns the balance, and the minister knew it. Though morally certain that McCloud was dying, he turned to the probing eyes a countenance that was inscrutable and clad in a mask of hope. At last the patient spoke.

"Wal," he faltered, "I reckon you know best. Here goes—for—another—try!"

And that try carried him past the crisis. He ought to have died; by living he violated all prec-

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edents known to medical science, but live he did, and, once on the mend, the rude health and virile energy of the plainsman brought him a quick convalescence. By the time that the ducks and geese were flying north he was able to sit up, and a week after they set him in the warm sun by the door. Then Ruth went home.

Every day, however, she rode over to see how her patient was progressing, and after each visit the minister would walk with her as far as the turn of the trail. They were now on such friendly terms that he felt at liberty to speak on a matter which had given him some disquiet. He was beginning to assimilate the Western life. One by one his Eastern prejudices had sloughed off, but as yet he had failed to accustom himself to her way of riding; and one day, just when she was about to leave him, he looked up suddenly and said:

"I wish you wouldn't ride like that."

"Why?" she queried, and the wonder that floated in her eyes filled him with shame of his prudery. "How should one ride?" she naively asked, and his discomfiture was complete.

"Pardon!" he stammered. "I—I—I ought not to have said it."

But she pressed for an answer. When he would

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not give it, she rode thoughtfully away. Next morning she did not come, nor the next, nor the next. A week passed by, and still she did not come. Once or twice he caught a glimpse of her when she was riding, but always at sight of him she wheeled and rode away. He was now sure that he had given her mortal offence; but he was mistaken. She was seeing herself in his eyes, trying herself by his standards. Having found out from her father how Eastern women ride, she tried their fashion, and after a fourth tumble pronounced it utterly hopeless.

"Bother!" she exclaimed. "It must be sheep those Easterners ride!"

## V

YET, in due course, the trouble worked out its own end. One morning, about sunrise, when she thought no one would be abroad, Ruth mounted her pony. Save for an occasional drift in the shadow of the bluffs, the snow was all gone. An infinite greenness replaced the whiteness and the silence. From under lazy lids drowsy nature shot green glances; the warm air vibrated to the song of the

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birds, the woods softly whispered a tale of sunlight glinting on the waters. The morning was perfect. It called Ritchie from his bed and set Si Mattheson early on the trail. He and Jemmy Hodges were to drive McCloud to Winnipeg, there to be fitted with an artificial foot.

"Didn't expect you quite so soon," the minister said, when Si and Jemmy passed him on the trail; "but Jim's all ready. Go ahead, I'll say good-bye when you come back."

He was feeling that morning the spell of the prairie—its mystery, its fascination. Its vast rolling billows filled him with a sense of peace and power. Its infinitude awed him; its teeming life, revelling in the joy of existence, found answering expression in his own soul. On that great expanse the settlers' cabins dwarfed to coops in a chicken-yard; still each was the prolific centre of motley noises—the lowing of kine, the cackle of fowls, the cries of men. Far to the south lay the ridge from which he had first seen the settlement. As it caught his eye he remembered the sudden sweetness which transfigured Jake's rough face—he understood it now.

"It is beautiful," he murmured.

Walking on, he breasted a sand-hill. As he crossed

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the ridge, Ruth came galloping up the rise with hair streaming on the wind.

"Aha, young lady!" he cried, seizing her bridle. "Now I've got you. Tell—why do you run from me?"

She looked rebelliously from under her cloud of hair. He was tall; his eyes almost levelled hers, and she saw that while they were soft, they were also very determined. Bowing low, she said:

"I—I am so different from the women you know. I—I—cannot—"

"A-h?" he breathed.

From her face his eye passed over the rounded bust, down all the length of the shameless, shapely limbs, and brought up at her foot. Within him, the man and his prejudice battled fiercely; but man is flame and woman is tow, and prairie winds blow strong. Up in his nostrils wafted a sudden sodden smell of the wild plains; his blood thrilled to the keen Northern air; in his veins mad spring rioted. Stooping quickly, he kissed her instep.

She flushed and trembled and leaned to him, her eyes raised to his; but as Ritchie lifted his hands to the yielding figure there came a loud halloa, and Si Mattheson's buggy topped the rise.

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"Say," Si rumbled, eying them curiously, "what air you two up to?"

"Oh, shet up, Si!" McCloud grinned. "Kain't you see when you ain't wanted? Drive on!"

Si whistled, but sat still and eyed the blushing girl with a meditative grin. "Thet's the way the cat jumps, is it?" he muttered softly. Then, fixing the distressed couple with a fatherly smile, he addressed himself to Jemmy. "Say," he said, elbowing that antediluvian in the ribs, "don't you reckon 'at it's 'bout time the vestry called this man for keeps?"

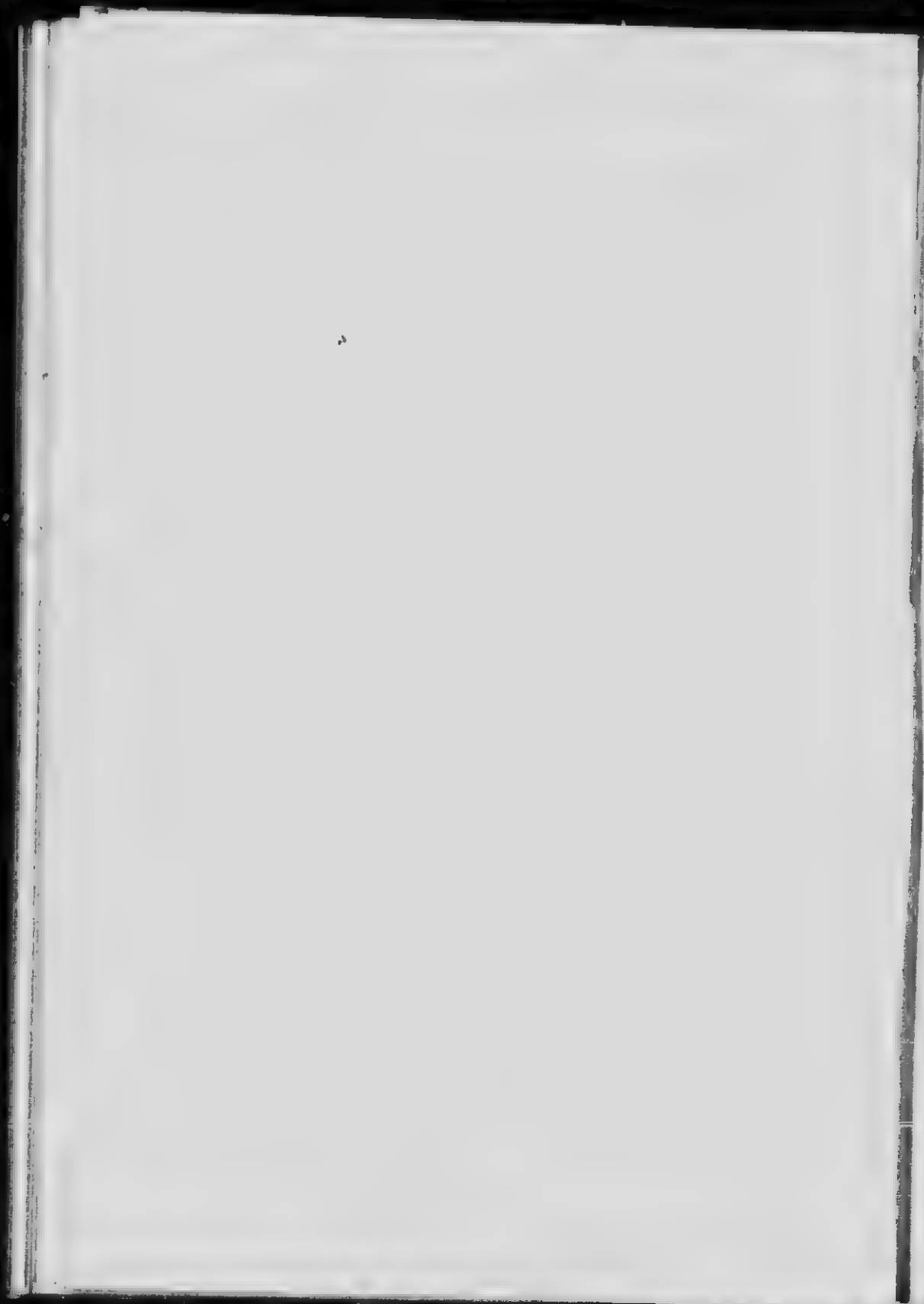
After giving the subject the consideration its gravity demanded, Jemmy still held to his former opinion that a minister ought to be married.

Slipping his arm quietly about Ruth's waist, the minister faced the issue.

"We're going to be married next week," he said.

A SON OF ANAK





## A SON OF ANAK

**O**N the verge of the Assiniboine Valley a steam thresher boomed, and whined, and rattled its slats, and whistled impatiently for liquid wherewith to quench its fiercest thirst. Its boiler tubes were hot, hot as the stoker's temper—a hundred and eighty degrees by the gauge—and that son of Vulcan fretted as if it were his own bowels that suffered flame. Jerking on the whistle, he said scarlet things to the water-hauler, who transmuted them into sulphurous speech while dipping from the river, eight hundred feet below.

"Can't make steam without water!" growled the stoker, and shook his fist at the feeder, who was signalling for more power.

In the midst of a black smut pall, a forty-inch separator whirled red arms like a squib in a cloud of ink. From its brazen larynx hurtled a vibrant, thunderous song that followed the feeder's hand

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both up and down the scale. Many an accidental split its harmonies. Sometimes an awkward sheaf would crack a tone; an uncut band brought forth a cough; and when, on occasion, a giant sheaf fed broadside in, the whole register disrupted, and the monster bellowed with the voice of leviathan.

At such times the son of Anak who fed the sheaves scowled blackly—not that he was angry, but rather because the band-cutter is natural enemy to the feeder and given to carelessness as the sparks fly up. The band-cutter, in his turn, spat, catlike, and blessed the pitchers. For their part, these worked seriously, tabling the sheaves according to the law of the band-cutter, which is a just law, though hard to keep.

On the stack the straw-men labored in seas of dust. Black clouds of it rose from the belching carriers and swept over the hurrying, hustling, sweltering hive, out to the sunburned prairies, there to drape the rain-washed bison-bones. The smell of it travelled farther—yes, as far as the ruined fort of Ellice, and set Père Bayon to sniffing in the door of the Indian mission. It also tilted Lettie Greer's nose when she and her cousin, Kate Howard, ran down to see the wheat—at least, they said it was to see the wheat.

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A flower of a girl was Lettie—pink, plump, tall, with a sweet face rifling through tawny clouds of hair. Her mouth was ripe for kissing, though, according to report, it was yet unknissed. She was modest, too, as became a girl brought up in the shadow of a mission; yet within her were sprouting the germs of a very healthy curiosity anent the sterner sex, as evidenced by this journey to see the wheat.

Within the log granary there was cool respite from the stewy kitchen with its satiating smells, and the girls sat on a wagon seat and gazed dreamily out on the threshing. Through the plasterless chinks a breeze came to toy with their hair.

"Dear me!" mused Kate. "How busy they are!"

"He's cutting bands," Lettie murmured sympathetically, if not very consecutively. Then she peeped through a chink and inquired: "What's his name?"

"Castle," replied Kate, joining her dark curls to the tawny clouds. "Castle, Arthur Castle."

Unconscious of their scrutiny, the band-cutter plied his knife. He was a tall lad of twenty or thereabouts; fair, when freed from the thrall of smut; a slip of the blooded English stock one finds scattered from Winnipeg to Fort McLeod.

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"Why don't they stop?" pouted Kate.

"Must finish to-night," Lettie responded, wisely.

"We've had 'em three days."

To which very reasonable statement Kate unreasonably replied: "Bother! I wish the old thing would break!" And just then, as though in answer to her wish, the whistle blew and they heard the feeder shout:

"What's the matter?"

"No water," the stoker answered. "Boiler's nigh to bustin'."

Turning from the door, they began to examine the wheat, and they gave it such close attention that they did not see the feeder step from his board. Letting a handful dribble through her fingers, Lettie remarked, with the air of a connoisseur in grains:

"Isn't it lovely?"

"Beauti—" Kate commenced, then stopped and screamed, for a pair of hands grabbed her by the ankles and tossed her into the bin. Then, full of the horse-play which passed for wit among his kind, the feeder turned on Lettie. She backed away, protesting, but he followed and took her by the waist.

"Over you go!" he laughed.

She landed high up in the bin, and came slipping,

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sliding down on an avalanche of wheat. It was very mortifying. To make it worse, as she struggled up, dishevelled, angry, ready to cry, she saw Castle standing in the door. His face shone beneath its layer of soot.

"You beastly *cad!*" he gasped. "You *beastly cad!*"

The feeder turned, and civilization and the backwoods faced together.

"Who's pinching you?" he sneered. "Mind your own—" "Business," he meant to say, but Castle's fist shot out and landed with a whip-like crack.

It was a smart rap, too, given from a full heart, and, though it lacked weight, the suddenness of it sent the feeder staggering against the farther bin. There he paused, momentarily paralyzed, blank astonishment and black anger darkening his face; but when he straightened from the blow, he seized a neck-yoke and swung it viciously.

With a swish it cut the air just above Castle's head. The girls screamed. A clever duck saved Castle his brains, but as he backed towards the door the feeder followed, swinging for another blow.

But the scream had reached a score of ears. Before he could strike again there came a rush of

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feet, a dozen heads blocked the door, and the boss thresher jerked Castle back and out.

"What's the matter, Sutherland?" growled the boss.

"Oh, nothin'!" muttered the feeder, shouldering his way through the crowd, and he followed the band-cutter back to the machine.

"What's the trouble, girls?" persisted the boss.

But just then the water-hauler drew round to the engine, the whistle called to work, and the girls remembered some pies which must be burning in the oven. As they ran by the separator, Sutherland turned his back and swept a pile of sheaves into the screaming cylinder.

"You can hev all the power you want!" yelled the stoker.

He nodded and went on rolling the loosened sheaves, feeding steadily, coaxing, urging, pressing, holding the thunderous voice down to a stifled, choking hum. When the boss thresher came to "spell" him, he shook his head and fed on, and on, and on, until the sweat washed white runlets down his face. And while he worked he thought.

Why, he asked himself, did the girl make such a fuss? In the backwoods that sired him they never cared. Why should these? Perhaps they didn't.

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Perhaps it was all due to the Englishman with his finicky ways. So he puzzled until the sun slipped in a blanket of umber and gold over the edge of the world, and dusk lent velvet shades to the threshing reek.

But at supper Sutherland quickly learned in whom the fault lay. He found himself studiously neglected. While the girls waited on the other men, a hard-featured neighbor woman supplied his needs. And he noted that his rival received many small favors. Kate kept his plate heaped, and when Lettie leaned for an empty dish, her arm touched his neck. Three times this happened, and every time the feeder choked. Yet he ate mechanically the things which were put to his hand, swallowed boiling tea without a wink, and got through the meal somehow.

After it was eaten he lit a lantern and touched Castle on the shoulder.

"Chore time!" he growled. "Them hosses is cool enough for oats by this."

As the door closed behind them the girls exchanged uneasy glances, and a man said, with a lift of the brow, "How about that?"

The boss thresher took the question to himself, and answered:



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"Oh, I reckon it's all right. Sutherland's a good sort, an' he's had time to cool. Besides," he added, with a touch of the strong man's philosophy, "they've gotter settle it some day."

In the stable Sutherland hung up his lantern and faced about. "I s'pose," he said, quietly, "as you're lookin' for a fight?" Castle nodded and began to peel his coat. "Oh, there's no hurry," the feeder went on. "Of course, I reckon to pay you some day, but not jes now. But say"—and here the puzzle of his brain slipped into his eyes—"what made them girls so all-fired mad?"

The Englishman stared. It was incredible! Yet the man's blue eyes were wide with question, and his face carried the look of a child corrected for mischief innocently done. Into Castle's consciousness crept a vague conception of the workings of a Western mind, and with it a feeling of pity.

"W-well," he stammered, "to—to tell you the truth—"

"That's what!" encouraged the Canadian. "Speak out! I'm like a blind hoss that's off the trail, an' I want my bearin's."

"Well, you were—just a little rough."

"That *was* it?"

"It was."

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The big man whistled. "Well, I'm—" he began, but paused, and then went on: "Jes to think! Why, the girls in the stump townships didn't mind it a bit. Reckoned it a ripping joke! Not that these ain't right," he added, hastily. "They're different, kind of eddicated, got more polish to 'em."

Leaning against a stall, Sutherland chewed a straw and the cud of reflection, and evidently made emendations in his theory of manners; for when Castle brought the horses from water he burst out:

"Say, put me down the darnedest fool in Manitoba! As for that crack on the law—let it go on account of eddication. An', what's more," he finished, holding out his hand, "jes so long as we travel with this outfit I'll be eternally obliged if you lam me whenever I straddle traces." And on this bargain they slept.

Now, healthy girls and well-fed robins sing in the early morning, and Lettie sang as she skimmed the milk. From the stables came the din of the thrasher's moving—blows and bangings, men's voices, the rattle of the carriers, the stroke of the sled. In the east a red sun smouldered. Down into the milk-house it shot a crimson ray and clothed the singing girl in ruby light. Sutherland, who just then

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peeped in, thought her the fairest thing on earth. Though his shadow fell athwart her crock, she went on floating in the clotted cream, and remarked, without looking up:

"He's going, Kate, but I can't cry!"

A masculine cough made her sensible of her mistake, and brought her, confused but extremely dignified, to her feet. "Well?" she queried.

The interrogation reduced Sutherland to a condition of at least partial imbecility. He coughed again, and shuffled, and his face—which he had washed very clean—rivalled the rising sun. He strove to get hold of the right end of a little speech that he had been conning over the last two hours. Castle composed it, that morning, in the dark stable, before breakfast.

"I was wanting to say, miss," he began; then, glancing up, he caught her eye, floundered, and finished very lamely—"I'm real sorry!"

But his manner pleaded as words could not. Lettie's eyes softened, and her lips drooped into their gentler curves, but she answered, very gravely:

"You were extremely rude."

He made no reply. A bewilderingly small foot was tapping the ground just beyond her skirt—

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enough in itself to deprive a man of the power of speech.

"And if I overlook it," she continued, rather enjoying her sudden accession of power, "I shall expect you to be friendly with Mr. Castle."

"Oh, that's all right!" he exclaimed, immensely relieved. "I'll bring him safe back."

"Oh, he's nothing to me!" she hastily replied, adding, with some confusion: "That is—well— you know, I meant, I shouldn't like to have him ill treated."

"Jes so," he cheerfully answered, "an' I'll smash any one as lays a finger on him! But there goes the engine. Good-bye, miss!"

"Good-bye," she answered, and watched him join the outfit.

Up the slope from the stables came the engine, with its double yoke of oxen hawing, geeing, swinging right and left in vain attempts to avoid both the curse of labor and the driver's cutting whip. After they had crossed the ridge and lumbered down the other side, the thrasher's black shire mares snapped the separator up the hill, striking fire from its face. Sutherland handled the team, while Castle walked near by. Beside the feeder he appeared frail, almost boyish, and though his refined air

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caught the girl's fancy, her woman's instinct—inherited of a thousand generations—leaned to the man's strength.

A long move the outfit made that day—long even for Manitoba, where a horse reels off his seventy miles a day and a man's neighborhood encircles twenty miles; but it was not long enough to quench the sudden interest Castle developed in the Ellice Mission service, nor to stop Sutherland from riding once a week to his homestead on the Assiniboine. This, a quarter-section of sand and gopher—pinned down, as it were, and eternally prevented from dribbling over the valley's edge by the lone log-cabin that staked its centre—lay an hour's ride to the south of Greer's.

Its seductions could hardly be accountable for its owner's Sabbath rides, nor is it to be wondered at if he never got there. For, as the luck had it, his trail ran in between Greer's house and stable, and the law of the bachelor will not allow a wifeless man to pass the house of a wedded woman without tasting of her bread. Thus, when Castle escorted Lettie home from mass, he invariably found the feeder discussing seed grains, gopher poisons, or kindred interesting matters with her father.

And each wooed the girl after his own fashion—

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one in words, with all the advantage conferred by education; the other in the dumb language of the eye. Lettie, for her part, held the balance and distributed her favors so impartially as to puzzle even her mother. Perhaps she was puzzled herself. At any rate, she walked in maiden mystery, veiling her thoughts—a sad enigma to her parents, a sweet trouble to her lovers.

Up Miniska way, these soon began to taste the joys of threshing at temperatures that froze the mercury. About their settings stretched limitless wastes, seas of white that curved from the skyline clear to the frozen pole. On unthreshed farms the stacks upreared like hills of snow, putting by contrast a bright vermilion blush upon the dirty separator.

The water-hauler had forsaken wheels for runners, and moved like a blue iceberg. The stoker had swathed his beloved engine in swaddling-clothes. He warmed him by banging the ice from his water-barrels, and in the intervals of chopping wood cursed the cold that lowered his steam. And as these were the early snows, and the trails lay beneath a foot of drift, the siege of Lettie was raised for the space of a lunar month.

One day a thing happened which came nigh to

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putting Sutherland out of the running for good and all. From every sheaf, as it struck the table, snow and dust sifted down and packed into a slippery mass beneath his feet. At the length of his arm the iron-toothed cylinder whirled two thousand times a minute; and he, while reaching for a sheaf, slipped and plunged forward. A moment's hesitation and he had been done; but as his body struck the feed-board Castle seized him and threw wildly back.

Sutherland rose from the snow. The cylinder had caught and ripped away his buckskin mit; the blood ran freely from a mangled finger.

"A close shave," he said, slowly; "an' but for you—no shave at all. An' what's more," he finished, with a jerk of his shoulder towards the south, "there's many a man, seeing the way things is fixed, as would have waited to cut another band."

On the third day of the following week the first blizzard swept from the north and snowed the outfit in for keeps. The drift flew by thick as fleece, and all signs pointed to a three days' blow; but early in the morning of the second day it slacked sufficiently for the boss to drive the threshers in to Russel. There he paid off—a wise action, which earned him the applause of the burgesses and

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also promoted the prosperity of the hotel, in which he owned a half-interest.

Sutherland and Castle were not among the roisterers at his bar. They sat one on either side of the stove, watching the storm and talking in low tones.

"Yes," the feeder was saying, "we'd just as well settle the thing now. In my time I've been a no-account sort—that kind"—lifting his brow at the half-drunken threshers—"but that's old hist'ry. Not saying that I ain't a fool to even think of her, but—God, man, I could burn for her!"

He stared for a while on the white and whirling drift, and then resumed.

"Of course that don't count, an' this is how the business stan's, according to my idea. But for you I'd never trouble man nor woman more; therefore to you falls the first chance. Now—"

"No, no!" Castle interrupted. "I won't have that!"

But the other was the stronger. "Yes, you will," he rejoined, "for I'm jes a-goin' down to my own place, an' there I stay till you come an' say you've played your hand."

Silence fell between them, and held until Castle broke it. "Think we can strike out to-day?" he asked.

Sutherland studied the flying drift. "It *does*



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seem to be thinning," he said at last. "I reckon we could make Nork's road-house for the night."

In half an hour it lightened still more, and the two started south afoot. A line of grassless white alone marked trail from prairie, but this they followed easily enough until, after an hour's tramp, the wind raised and the drift thickened.

"Think we'd better go on?" Castle inquired.

"Have to!" Sutherland answered.

A look to the north gave his reason. The stinging drift filled Castle's eyes, the wind smote him foully, the frost tweaked him by the nose. As they plunged steadily south, the roar of the wind rose to a muffled shriek. From the bluffs it tore the ten-foot drifts, from the prairie a foot of snow, and it stirred the mass and whirled it round and round until the air was thick as cheese.

Still they pressed on, Sutherland in the lead. He was off the trail now, and knew it, but he kept the wind slanting to his cheek, steered southeast, and trusted to strike Nork's mile-long fence. If the wind had held, they would have struck it; but in the middle of the afternoon it veered due east, and sent them miles off their course.

In the black of night, amid darkness thick enough to cut, they stumbled by the road-house. Around

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them the drift whirled and twisted, working up the pivotal motion which keeps the wanderer on a circle. Once they tried to make a fire in a bluff, and spent their matches on its green and sappy wood. And it grew colder, colder, colder, until, at daybreak, it registered forty and odd below.

They were out on the desolate Alkali Flats when gray dawn banished the inky blackness, but they had no surcease from the bitter blast, the stinging spume, the searing frost. They moved now slowly, wearily, automatically lifting their feet, wandering like sinful souls in a frozen purgatory. Castle was nearly spent. In the early morning he fell forward and began to lick snow—he was marked for the white death.

"Let me sleep!" his tired body cried. "Let me die!" his weary spirit echoed.

But Sutherland forced him up and on. When persuasion failed, he slipped his belt and laid on the buckle end. Thus, as men in a dream, they wrought out their travail, and thus, dreamlike, they found themselves gazing stupidly upon an Indian tepce. Now standing out dirty, black against the snow, now veiled in fleecy scud, it loomed through the drab of the drift like a mirage or a portion of their dream.

Before its entrance stood a jumper, a native sled,



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but around the place was neither sound nor sign of life. The flaps were laced with frozen shaganappy thongs, hard as boards; yet, somehow, Sutherland fumbled them loose and pushed Castle in. Then he followed into the presence of the coldest host that ever welcomed man from storm.

At their feet, stark naked, lay a young Cree squaw, and beside her, wrapped in the blankets she had stripped from her limbs, was a dead papoose. Cold, stiff, hard as statues of bronze, they stared up in Sutherland's face.

"Poor girl!" he muttered, laying his hand on the blankets. "Pony strayed, an' your man went to hunt it. Well, I reckon you don't want these any more. Here, Castle! Lend a hand to lift her." But Castle was down, and as still as the dead woman.

Sutherland swung his belt. "Get up!" he cried. "Get up! Get up!"

The lad moaned, without opening his eyes, and the feeder stood, belt in hand, staring gloomily down upon him. "Clean tuckered out!" he groaned. "What 'll I do?"

Through the open flap the fine drift spume poured and powdered alike the quick and the dead. Outside the blizzard thundered wildly by; within the

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strong man wrestled with a sudden darkling thought. A minute passed—two—then he stepped out and walked rapidly away; but before he had covered a score of yards he stopped, returned, and bent on his rival the same frowning stare.

Once more he left, resolutely this time, yet halted again at fifty yards and slowly retraced his steps.

About noon of the third day the wind lowered and the drift lightened sufficiently for Père Bayon to make his way as far as Greer's. It was cold yet, to be sure, but a layer of comfortable fat kept the good father snug and warm; so, like a red-cheeked Christmas god, he waddled through the snow.

"For the land sakes!" exclaimed Mrs. Greer, when he entered her kitchen. "What brings you out, father?"

"There's something moving over the valley," he answered, closing the storm-door. "Lend me your glasses, daughter."

Lettie handed down the binoculars from their place beside the clock, and said, "If you'll wait a minute, I'll go, too."

While she slipped on her moccasins, Père Bayon warmed his hands and looked smilingly on. He was proud of Lettie. He christened her; from him

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she received her first communion; and his careful hand had trained her until she bloomed like a sun-kissed peach on the pleasant side of a convent wall.

"Come along!" she cried. "I'll race you to the stack!"

Under its lee they took shelter from the wind. From their feet the valley sheered down to the drift haze which shrouded the bottoms and the frozen river. They could hear the stream complaining beneath its frozen bonds. Opposite, the bald headlands plumped up, round, swelling, chastely beautiful, like the breast of a proud woman. But something else drew their eyes—a black spot that moved along the farther slope, just where the crown-ing bank cut the sky-line.

"Must be a wolf," Lettie said. "No man would cross the trail that fashion."

The priest was focusing the glasses. "I have known men to do it," he replied.

A moment later an exclamation brought her to his side.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Look yourself."

She raised the glasses, and instantly, through the drab of the drift, there loomed up the misty figure of a giant man. He was stumbling along the trail,

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sometimes in it, more often off, dragging an Indian jumper.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it's Sutherland! What can have happened?"

"Look again," said the priest.

"He's hauling a sled. Now he's staggering; oh!"—catching her breath—"he's fallen! There, he's up again! Now he's made the ravine. He's stretching on the sled—going to coast the hill."

"Needs a clear head," murmured Père Bayon.

Slowly the sled moved off, but soon increased its speed until it fairly flew. Half-way down it vanished in a black ravine, and the watchers held their breath; then out from the dark of the trees it swooped like a pouncing hawk, rounded the bottom curve, and shot the bank.

"Where's your father?" hastily inquired the priest.

"Cleaning stables."

"Then run and tell him to hitch the ponies. I'll go on."

He ran heavily down the valley trail, but Lettie made such speed that the ponies overtook him on the flats. A minute later they pulled up at the frozen ford, and Lettie held the lines while her father broke a trail through the drift.

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"Why," he exclaimed, "there's two of 'em!"

Swathed in the dead squaw's blankets, Castle lay beside the broken jumper. Over his face Sutherland had thrown an arm. His own was turned upward to the storm—white, deathly white, with the whiteness of freezing flesh. When moved, he groaned; but neither sob nor sigh told that the spirit yet lingered in the body of the other.

In ten minutes the two were lying in shake-downs in Greer's kitchen. Both were badly frozen, and for two long hours the farmer and the priest rubbed, and chafed, and soaked frozen limbs in kerosene, and applied all the remedies proved of prairie surgery. Just before dark, when the sufferers slipped their agony for heavy sleep, Père Bayon straightened his weary back and plodded back to the mission.

"Some one 'll have to sit up," said Greer. "They're quiet now, but soon the fever 'll take 'em."

"Let me," begged Lettie.

Her mother looked dubious, and remarked, tentatively, "They'll mebbe wander a little."

"Oh, I won't mind! An' dad will be in easy call."

After the old folks climbed the stairs to bed, she did feel a little nervous. In the chimney the nor'wester wailed sadly; across the floor black shadows flitted. Outside the drift hissed by. The

## A SON OF ANAK

clouded windows rattled, and about the door every bit of iron was bossed with glittering frost. Yet she sat by the fire, picking pictures from the glowing coals, until a voice babbled into sudden talk.

She rose hastily, every nerve thrilling. Sutherland was sitting up in bed. He had torn the bandage from his face; his red eyes peered into the darkest corner; he spoke in low but earnest tones.

"Get up! Get up! Get up, I say!"

She stepped quickly to the stairs; but before she could call, her own name fell from the man's lips. She hesitated. He called again, gently, and curiosity balanced fear. Quietly closing the door, she tiptoed to his bed.

"Yes?" she said.

He knew her, but incorporated her personality in his dream. "Ah, there she is!" he sighed. "Come for him!" Then sinking back, he closed his eyes.

But Lettie was not more than seated before he was again unravelling his tangled skein of thought. "I could leave him," he pondered, frowning heavily. "Who'd know? One night alone, an'—why not?" He swayed from side to side while his heated mind duplicated every detail of the mental struggle in the tepee. Then, with a wild toss of the hands, he cried, bitterly:



## THE PROBATIONER

"God! I promised her to bring him back!"

In this fashion, bit by bit, with many breaks and pauses, Lettie gathered from the man's own lips the story of his love, his trial, and his temptation. As the night wore on and the fire died and the shadows slid forth to play about the room, she came to know him; and when at last gray morning stole through the whitened panes, it found her kneeling by his bed.

On his frost-scarred face the chill rays softly fell. One arm lay beneath his head; the sleeve had rolled from the other, baring writhing bands and knots of muscle. She wondered at its strength. His face was thinner, too. Strife, struggle, and mental travail had refined it; his mouth was lined with sorrow. And these lines, as she brooded over him, let loose a flood of love and tender sympathy.

A rosy flush banished the watcher's pallor; her head drooped lower, lower, lower, until its tawny clouds hid his face.

He stirred; but a moment later, when his eyes opened, she was smoothing Castle's pillow. He could not see her face, but he saw her hand fondle the lad's tangled curls. How should he know that it was done for love of *him*? He turned his back and groaned.

"You're in pain?" she asked, anxiously.

## A SON OF ANAK

"A twinge," he answered, and just then Mrs. Greer came down-stairs.

"Now you go right to bed, child," she said, "an' get some sleep."

But sleep was not for Lettie. She lay, quietly happy, dreaming her love-dreams, until a decent interval elapsed; then, hungry for another look at their subject, she dressed and stole down-stairs.

Sutherland's bed was empty.

"He's gone," said her mother, in reply to her startled look. "Jes' wouldn't wait another minute. I never did see sech a man!"

While Lettie, thinking he had felt her caress, bowed her head in secret shame, Sutherland broke trail to his own place. The storm was over. Far to the south the wild nor'wester was ending its days as a tropical zephyr. Eternal silence wrapped the prairie. All about the bluffs were veiled in shimmering white, the keen air thrilled like wine, the frost set the limbs tingling. Earth, air, and sky blazed; from a million facets the snow cast up the bright sunlight, yet not a single ray pierced the blackness of his soul.

For the next two weeks he lay close, nursing a sick heart and his frosted face. Nothing could tempt him forth—not even the prairie-chicken that

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picked about his door, nor a saucy wolf that daily threw a challenge to his dog. Then, tiring of inaction, he decided to put in the remainder of the winter lumbering on the Shell. He told his mind to his nearest neighbor, but—he did not go. He waited for Castle, faintly hoping he had read the girl wrong; but Castle never came.

So the winter months dragged on like years, and in the middle days of March Sutherland drove into Moosomin for provisions, and for tobacco, of which he now smoked a double share. As he waited his turn in the general store, two women at the counter exchanged the gossip of a county. At first he paid no attention. Like the hum of a hive their voices sounded in his ears until the stouter of the two mentioned Lettie Greer. Then he listened.

"Yes," said the other; "an' who's to marry 'em?"

"Père Bayon, to be sure!"

"Well, seein' as the young man's a Protestant, I thought—"

"You 'urn, Sutherland!" broke in the store-keeper. "Tobacco? Must be eating it these days!"

He laughed at his own joke, and chatted while he bustled round. Sutherland answered, but he caught every syllable of the women's talk. One had

## A SON OF ANAK

heard that the young man's father would stock a farm; the other had seen a handsome present from his English sisters. Both had bids to the wedding and nothing fit to wear. Thus they rattled on until, heart-sick, he left the store.

"Looks real bad, doesn't he, poor fellow?" observed the stouter woman, glancing after him.

"He does so," sympathetically agreed the other. "What's he doin' here? Thought he was up the Shell."

"Says he's going to strike farther west to-morrow," commented the storekeeper, which piece of news the women carried to the wedding.

All that night Sutherland tossed and turned, but towards morning he dozed off and slept till the sun shone full upon his window. Then he rose and flung wide the door. A flood of light poured in. The air breathed warm of spring. On bare knolls prairie-cocks strutted before admiring hens; Munro's fowls cackled cheerily, a cow-bell tinkled down the valley. And as he stood, drinking in the sunshine, away to the north the mission bells began to chime.

At first he thought it the matin, but the lilting measure and the high sun said no. All at once its significance burst in upon him. Slamming the door, he lay down and buried his head, yet, though

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he shut out the bell's faint music, forth from the blackness shone Lettie's flower face.

He was still there when, two hours later, Castle opened the door.

"Hello, sleepy head!" he called; then, appalled by the face which was raised from the bed-clothes, he exclaimed: "Good God, man, are you sick?"

Sutherland passed the question. "You was to have first chance," he said, sternly and reproachfully. "You got it. Was there need to leave me here to suffer hell for three long months?"

"But look here, old man," Castle pleaded, "I was sick for a whole month, and Munro said that you'd gone to the Shell."

"Oh, well, it don't matter now," Sutherland answered, in tones that were hopelessly dull, and he stared at the opposite wall until Castle asked:

"Aren't you going to wish me joy?"

Sutherland glanced up angrily and growled: "Would you if I was in your shoes? You've—"

"Say," Castle interrupted, "you surely don't think that I— By George, I believe you do! What a lark! I must tell the girls."

As he ran outside, Sutherland sprang to follow. "Come back!" he roared. "Come back, I say!"

## A SON OF ANAK

Then he stopped dead, and gasped, for the door opened and Lettie stepped inside.

"I thought it was your—your husband," he stammered.

"*My* husband?" she echoed wonderingly. "I—I haven't one!"

She stood before him, flushing and paling, trembling like a lily in the wind, and he shook in sympathy. For a moment he was silent, trying to grasp the situation; then he spoke, and the only thing the stupid could think to say was:

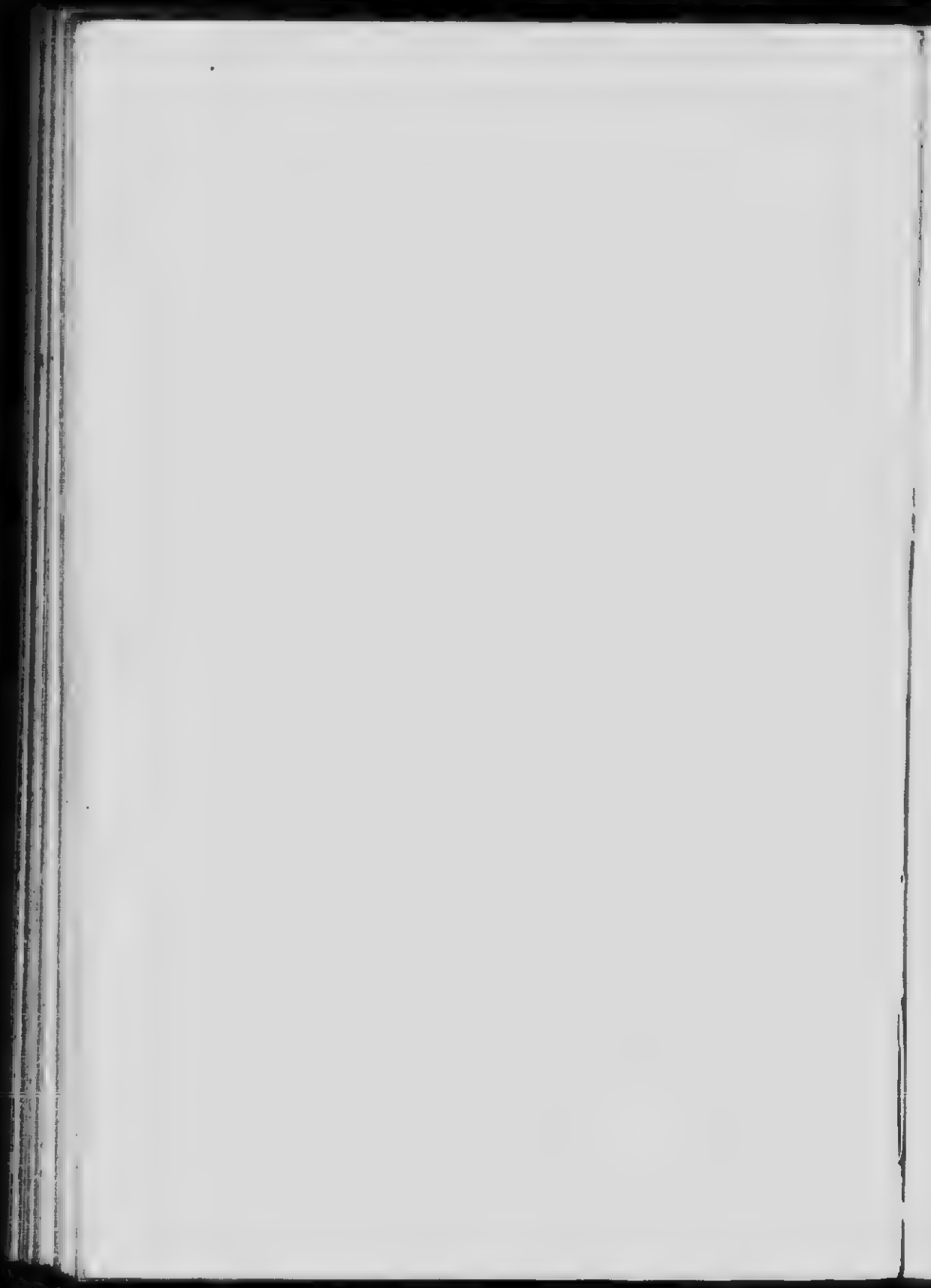
"But—but—but he asked you?"

"Yes," she answered, stepping by him to the window, "but he soon—got over it. Look!"

It was a small, low window, and, as Sutherland bent, their heads almost touched. Outside, in a brand-new Portland cutter, sat Kate Howard, and in her ear Castle was whispering something which made her blush and smile.

"Don't they look happy?" Lettie whispered.

And then—and then—and then—ah, well!



**THE MERCY OF THE FROST**





## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

### I

**I**T lacked but a day of Christmas, and over the Northland the frost-god had thrown a cloth of purest white. From the parallel of fifty-three it stretched, unsullied, northward over the lands of the Hudson Bay Company to the frozen pole, but to the south, lonely farmsteads, black and ugly, thrust upward through the snow. These occurred in irregular sequence, and were grouped in small settlements, with wide tracts of prairie lying between. On each uprose some sort of habitation—sod-shanty, log-cabin, frame-house, or hut of mud and wattles, according to the taste and fortune of its owner.

Apart from the difference in house fashions—indicative of past, not present, fortunes—the farms presented a deadly likeness. The same yellow straw-stacks dotted their fenceless fields; on all, acres of wind-blown fall ploughing smirched the eternal whiteness; and the smallest shack had its

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huge tent of firewood upreared among the drifts. Besides this identity of physical appearance, they had other things in common. Sulky-rakes, gang-ploughs, and self-binders thrust red and green protesting limbs from hoary drifts; a universal mortgage covered all; and on this particular day a pennon of smoke trailed above each house like a banner of Christmas cheer.

On the eastern edge of the settlement of Silver Creek, a large log-house seemed to be trying to out-smoke its neighbors. From either end of the main building a steamy column spurted, the sod roof reeked through every cranny, while in the kitchen lean-to a wood-stove roared like a thresher's engine. The door of this house opened, and a shapely girl called to a man who was chopping wood:

"I declare, dad, the woodbox's emp'y ag'in!"

Through the open door came girls' laughter and the hum of women's talk. The man leaned on his axe-helve and looked up, a good-natured grin puckering his red face.

"All right, Susie: all right, gal!" he laughed. "I'm a-comin', but air you eatin' the wood? Never seed sech weemen' Bill don't no what he's a-gettin'."

"Thinks he does," retorted the girl, smiling roguishly. "Hurry, dad!"

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

She was to be married Christmas morning, and that evening the neighbors would drop in, Northern fashion, to offer their good wishes. This meant supper and a dance, wherefore the house was a-buzz with preparation, and in the lean-to a half-dozen neighbor women baked and brewed.

After he had filled the woodbox, the farmer hung over the stove while he cracked a joke with the women. "Jes think, Mis' Harkins," he remarked, slyly stealing a cooky from her pan, "how time does scoot! Seems like yesterday as I was buzzin' you. D' ye remember the night I toted ye home from singing-school, an' med Hank so mad he wanted ter lick me?"

Mrs. Harkins, a tall, gaunt woman, family worn and shaved to the bone by the stern struggle with the inhospitable Northern soil, looked up with a pleasant smile. "Oh, shore!" she laughed. "Thet don't count, Silas. You was doin' it jes ter make Christie jealous."

"Well, now, sis, I dunno! I reckon I med Hank race his horses."

"Send him erlong, Christie!" exclaimed the pleased woman, "afore he eats all my cookies. Ain't you ashamed, Silas, a-talkin' sech nonsense afore the gals?"

## THE PROBATIONER

"Silas Brown," ordered his wife, "jes git to yer choppin'. Here's three stoves to keep a-goin', an' the folks a-comin' at six."

By the time the farmer had finished his chores the pale winter sun had slid behind the distant school-house. All signs pointed to a rough night. A dash of snow powdered the air, the north wind was herding the drifts, and all day a brilliant "dog" had chased the sun. As Silas came up from the stables, tinkling sleigh-bells sounded in the west. He stopped and shaded his eyes, muttering:

"Kinder early! Mebbe it's the fiddler!"

Suddenly his eyes grew sick and troubled. . . . "Shorely, it kedn't be him," he murmured, "of a Christmas night?" But a moment later his hand dropped, and he groaned: "It's Fraser, shorely! Them's his sorrels."

Over the stubble west of the house a beautiful carriage team dashed with a Portland cutter. Heavy furs muffled the driver, but a gray beard escaped from beneath his muffler and told that he was old. His figure, too, was bent, but a pair of hot, brown eyes burned under penthouse brows. At this figure Silas stared, bereft of speech.

"Well," greeted the driver, in a high, nasal tone, "ye'll know me again, Mr. Brown!"

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

"No offence, Mr. Fraser—no offence," the farmer hastily apologized. "I was hardly expectin' ye. This is Christmas Eve."

The old man's eyes snapped. "I ken it," he growled, "an' a fine time for a man to pay his lawfu' debts. Ye'll eat yer pudden the better for bein' a free man. Of coorse," he went on, lugging a bulky envelope from his pocket, "ye ha'e the intrust ready?"

Silas quailed. The package was indissolubly connected in his mind with memories of humiliating browbeating, of hard toil and profitless returns.

"I—I—I'm sorry—" he faltered; then, catching the usurer's glance, stopped.

It was maliciously triumphant, domineering, and pregnant of secret intelligence. The whole face brimmed with conceit of power, and the eyes demanded its observance. It expressed the man. Sooner than loose his grip on a debtor, it was said that Fraser would have him die in his bond. For a long minute he sat enjoying the farmer's discomfort.

"Ye meanin' that it's no forthcomin'?" he asked, tightening his lines significantly.

The action scared Silas. "For God's sake, Mr. Fraser," he called, as the horses stepped, "don't

## THE PROBATIONER

be so quick! I did my bes', but this has been a hard year. Wheat froze i' the milk, cattle low, hogs three an' a half cents dressed, an'—"

"Ye spent twenty dollars at Russel's store a week agone," broke in the usurer, savagely. "Twenty dollars o' my intrust, Silas, ye spent on ribands an' print an' sech truck. Now! now!" he went on, raising a deprecating hand as though challenging a lie. "It's no use talkin'! Ye know ye did."

The hectoring tone irritated the farmer. His huge fists bunched inside his mitts, but he answered humbly enough, "Ye know my gal's ter be married, Mr. Fraser."

"What's thet to me?"

"She jes kedn't be wi'out a bit weddin'-dress, now, ked she?" Silas pleaded. "Ye've had children of yer own, Mr. Fraser."

The usurer made no answer, and the fading twilight left his face in shadow. Twenty years before he had been counted a fair neighbor; a bit close on a bargain, perhaps, but otherwise an average man. Then, all of a sudden, the hand of fate pressed sorely on him. In one short year his wife died, a wagon-wheel crushed his drunken son, and his daughter eloped with a rakish hired-man—to escape his bitter temper, people said; but be this

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

as it may, he never forgave, to the day she died in travail.

"Ye've had children!" reiterated Silas. He could not see the coal-like eyes, the livid face.

"On'y a bit weddin'-dress?"

Just then a peal of girlish laughter travelled from the house, and, like flame to powder, touched off the usurer's passion.

"Wastrels!" he screeched, shaking his fist. "Wastrels all! Riotin' wī my siller. Must ha'e a weddin'-dress, must she? Let the strumpet wear—"

The sentence was never finished. As the vile word passed, Silas struck him upon the mouth. Then into his mind crowded the insults of a dozen years. Frost, drought, rust, railroad monopolies, all the evils that afflict the Northern farmer incarnated in the person of the money-lender. Seizing the axe, he raised as though to end them all.

"By God!" he shouted. "I'll—"

For the space of a dozen breaths Fraser trembled on the threshold of the valley of shadows. Had he flinched, even moved, the axe had surely fallen, but he sat perfectly still, glowering angrily upon the farmer. And Silas thirsted to let go. He hung on tiptoe, while a hot devil within urged him to strike.



## THE PROBATIONER

Twice he raised and twice he lowered, then, with a bitter curse, he flung the axe far out in the snow. A minute passed, and neither spoke. . . . Two! And they still stared at each other through the gloom.

At last Fraser stuffed the deed in his pocket and shook up his lines. "Ye have my congratulations, Mr. Brown," he said, as the sleigh moved off. "Ye've done that which man never did before. An' it 'll cost ye dear. Principal an' intrust, as ye well know, are baith due on your mortgage. Ye have till nine in the mornin' to pay in full."

Until the north wind drowned the clashing bells Silas stood like a frozen man. Behind him a poplar windbrake tossed skeleton arms against the darkening sky.

The snow was now falling fast, the drift flew hissing by. Suddenly the house door opened, and a band of yellow light fell full upon him. Within, all was light and warm. Scoured tins smiled from the white walls, the stove winked blackly, and chattering women moved about the well-scrubbed floor.

"Sup-per!" sang a cheerful voice. "Bring an armful of wood with yer!"

As he loaded up the wood, Silas thought of the consequences of his act. "Brace up!" he muttered. "He kain't do nuthin' till after the weddin'. Brace

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

up, Sil' he repeated, with infinite tenderness, "or ye'll spoil it fer the little gal."

His supper was set in the lean-to, for the cotton partitions had been removed in the body of the house and the floor cleared for dancing. Susie and Letty Green had hung the walls with spruce boughs and chains of scarlet berries. A rough board seat ran all around; in the far corner stood a chair and table, which presently would enthrone the fiddler; and a half-dozen stable-lanterns dangled from the joists.

"Ain't it pretty!" exclaimed Susie, when she had finished lighting up.

She and Lettie stood, each with an arm about the other, gazing pridefully upon their work. To them the low-ceiled room, with its swinging lanterns, was very beautiful. Perhaps at that very moment, two thousand miles east and south, some careless beauty was giving a last chance to a myriad-lighted ball-room without experiencing a tithe of their enjoyment.

"It's jes lovely!" Lettie enthusiastically agreed. "Dear! I wish the boys would hurry up."

They had not long to wait. Though the storm now swept the prairie, a score of teams were creeping slowly towards the light Silas had hung from the

## THE PROBATIONER

gable. In five minutes a hoarse shout and the groan of frosty runners sent Susie flying to the door, where three tall, snow-powdered McKays were digging a like number of girls from the bottom of a sleigh.

"Merry Christmas!" she screamed.

The boys answered with a whoop, and one of them growled: "Hurry ep, now, Belle! Here's another load awaitin'!"

"Jim!" screamed the girl. "Let go! Kain't you tell a han' from a foot?"

"Ain't much difference 'twixt yourn," Jim ungallantly answered. "Now! Heave-ho, in you go!"

Grabbing the girl around the waist, he swung her into the kitchen, then, leaping into his sleigh, he whirled the team and galloped to the stable. Sleigh followed sleigh. From all sides came the tinkle of storm-muffled bells, and soon the house was thronged with stout, red-faced lads and strong girls, pretty, but thickened with heavy choring. The boys were moccasined, and wore long arctic socks over heavy woollen breeches; store tweed, or fancy moose-skin coats covered their upper works, while the girls had added a touch of finery to their homely winseys. By seven the guests were all in, and three sets of lancers held the floor.

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

"All — a — mande — left! Hands — acrost!  
Down — the — centre! Swing — the — corner —  
lady!" sang Jim McKay, in time to the music.

The muffled stamp of moccasins, the vigorous clack of Sunday shoes almost drowned his voice and the squeaking fiddle. They danced furiously. While the girls balanced on the corner, the boys double-shuffled, did fancy steps, and cut pigeon-wings as they plunged to meet their partners.

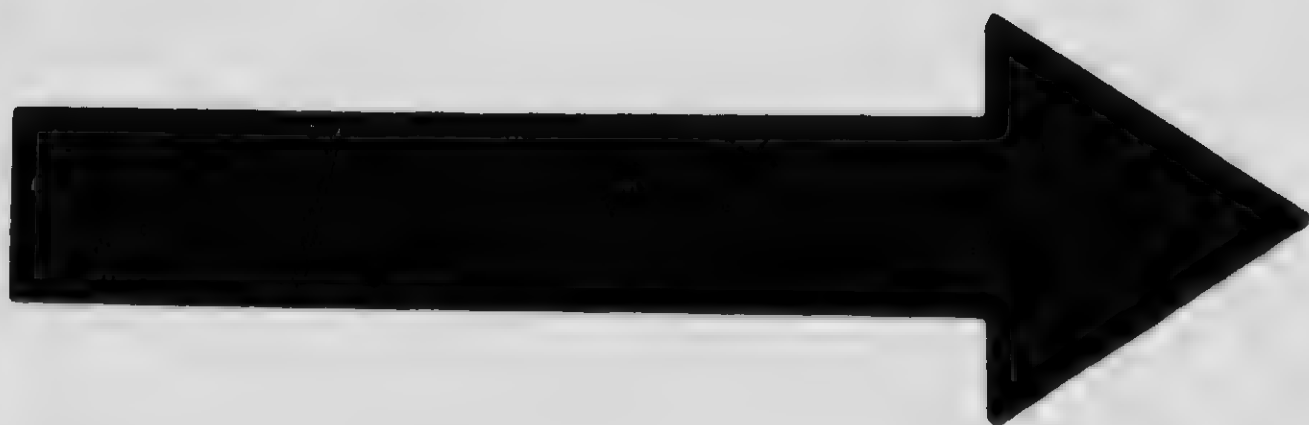
"An — turn — to — the — right! Grand — march!" sang Jim, at the end of the set.

His eye was on Susie, who was ushering in the last load of girls. Great is the pride of the man who cuts the prospective groom out of the first dance with his bride.

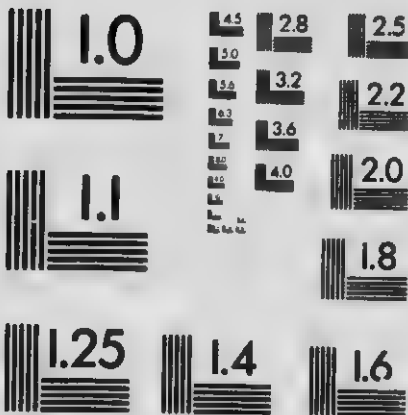
"*Chaussez!*" he roared, at the opportune moment, and shot across the floor on a mad gallop. But just then Sam Short, Bob Moore, and three remittance-men also dived for the prize.

"Hands off!" laughed Susie, wrenching free. "Now, boys, line up an' shet yer eyes, and the man that walks straightest 'cross the floor gets the dance. No winkin'."

While they were pacing forward, gobbler-fashion, lifting their feet very high, she slid by and joined her *fiancé*. "Thought they'd done you, Bill," she



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## THE PROBATIONER

whispered, as they whirled off together. "Oh, look at them! Geese!"

But Jim got the next dance, a set of lancers, and he handled it as became a *virtuoso* in calling off.

"Jes look at Maggie Ross!" Susie whispered, as they balanced on the corner.

The girl, a strong, lithe creature, was simply revelling in an ecstasy of rhythmic movement. Her supple body swung with an unconscious abandon, and she stepped prettily on the corners when she might have been resting. Just as Susie spoke, Maggie turned to speak to Belle McKay, who was sitting out the dance.

"*All — swing — the — corner — lady!*" sang Jim McKay.

"Hurry, Mag!" called Bob Moore, her partner.

The girl turned, saw that she was late, and sprang with out-stretched hands. Bob, who was executing a *pas seul* while waiting, staggered from the impact, tripped, and fell with a comical expression of astonishment on his face. The girl stood over, horrified, looking down on the havoc she had wrought.

"Well!" she innocently exclaimed. "Did—you—ever? Why, I jes touched him!"

A roar of laughter greeted the naïve remark.

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

The men howled and the girls screamed, while the unfortunate Bob lay, simulating immense alarm, and yelled:

"Hold her back, boys! Hold her back! I give in, Mag. I do, shorely. Fetch the parson."

And while the young folks thus poured of their abundance of the wine of life, black care hobnobbed with the master of the house. Silas did his best, but now and then, perhaps in the middle of a laugh, a sickening sense of coming trouble would strike him dumb. Once Susie noticed his grave face, and in a pause of the dance slipped behind him and whispered, "What's wrong, dad?"

Before he could answer she was called to her place, so she read his trouble in her own way. "Dad's goin' to miss me ever so much," she said, doubtfully, to Bill Lamance.

"He had orter," replied Bill, with an admiring glance that drew upon him a box on the ear.

But after that Susie's laughter took on a quieter note, and she cast many a sympathetic glance towards her father, who sat listening to the voice of the storm.

Until long past midnight the blizzard thundered by. Early in the evening gray figures etched them-



## THE PROBATIONER

selves upon the window-panes, to be buried quickly beneath a film of clouded ice. Whenever the door opened a narrow band of light revealed a wild snow-flurry sweeping by; and the cold blast, rushing in, froze the hot, moist air, and filled the place with chilly fog. At midnight the spirit thermometer registered a hundred degrees of frost. But about two in the morning the wind eased; at three, the moon peeped from behind a cloud at a white and frosty world. The teams were brought round, the girls snuggled in the sleigh bottoms, with hot stones to feet and hands, and by four the house was quiet.

Christmas morning broke fair and frosty. Not a breath of air stirred the rime upon the trees. The bluffs were wreathed in a shimmering veil, the keen air thrilled—thrilled like wine, and when the sun slipped out of his blanket of rose and gold a sea of sparkling diamonds shot back his rays. The wedding had been set for eleven, but it was nearly twelve before the minister's Indian ponies came skipping down the trail. The lines were slung behind the preacher's back, his fur coat bristled with frost, and his long arms were flapping, windmill fashion.

"Never saw a stiffer Christmas!" he exclaimed,

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

bustling into the house. "Had to stop three times in ten miles to thaw out. Waiting, are you? Here, Harkins! Help me off with this coat."

While he was being skinned of his furs he stood over the stove cracking his wedding jokes—hoary jests, accumulated and handed down by generations of country preachers. But presently Silas came in from putting up the team, and the minister resumed his wonted gravity.

Bride and groom stood ready. Susie carried no flowers—the North offers none to a winter's bride—but on her cheeks a pretty color came and went. A simple dress of white fluffed about her. A flood of chastened light poured through the frosted windows, brightly touching the scarlet berries among the green spruce boughs and lighting the circle of expectant faces.

The minister opened his book at the marriage service, and cleared his throat.

"Brethren," he began, "we—"

A clash of bells and the lament of a swiftly moving sleigh interrupted. The minister paused, forefinger on his place, and glanced inquiringly up. But Silas had already started for the door, his mind full of vague apprehension. As he threw it wide, a smoking team of ponies drew up opposite,

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and the sheriff of Russel County stepped from the sleigh.

### II

FLYING snow, fine as sifted salt; intense frost; a wind that pierces fur, wool, and flesh to the marrow of one's bones, mix and serve cold for a prairie storm. But as the gale is to the cyclone, so is the snow-storm to the blizzard. When it whirls over the North, winds that whip a hundred miles of prairie every hour snatch a season's snow from earth's four corners and stir it until the air is thick as hasty-pudding. The mercury freezes, but the spirit drops down, and down, and down. Heavy snow, frozen snow, snow that will drive through a stretched hide, walls the traveller within a fleecy cloud that stings the flesh like fire. In broad day, a hand held at arm's-length may not be seen; a cry drops flat and hollow to the ground; and at night inky blackness drapes the twisting chaos.

In spite of the sardonic coldness of his parting word, the usurer was full of a hot and bitter anger. For the first time a debtor of his had dared resent his arrogance of power. He had been defied, threatened; the blood trickled from his stricken mouth.

## THE MERCY OF THE FROST

Wiping it with his badger mitt, he leaned over and cut the horses along the flank.

With a sudden snort the brutes sprang from under the whip and raced along the trail. But presently a black blot grew out of the gloom just ahead, and a sleighing-song caught his ear.

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way,  
Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one-hoss open sleigh!"

The singing stopped as he turned out in the deep snow to let the singers by. They screamed Christmas greetings, but he answered nothing. Again and again he turned out to let sleighs pass, but presently the last—drawn by a laggard yoke of oxen—crawled past.

"Who is that?" he heard a voice exclaim.

"Looked like Fraser's sorrels!" a man answered.

"The old screw!"

The bitter answer smote his ear as the oxen swayed along high above him on the trail. Then he and the storm were alone together in the middle of a hundred thousand miles of prairie.

Now, if the trail be packed and the wind steady, a man may buck into the blackest kind of storm. And if he but keep the wind on one cheek, he is bound, sooner or later, to strike some sort of

## THE PROBATIONER

shelter. But before the usurer had gained half-way to Russel, the wind veered fifty points, a smother of snow snatched his breath, and the blizzard broke.

Instantly he was enveloped in a whirling flurry. He could neither see nor hear the horses, a wall of snow drove in between; but the jerking lines told the tale of their distressful snorts. He felt just as though he were being drawn through a black void, where the thunderous blizzard-voice drowned all sound. And he got so used to the eternal sameness of the great voice, to its one tremendous tone, that at last he heard nothing—everything, but infinite blackness, was not. Yet though blind and deaf, he could tell by the even quiver of the runners that the sorrels kept the trail.

For a mile or so the plucky beasts drove into the thick, then, all of a sudden, the cutter began to pitch. Instantly Fraser pulled up. As he stepped from the sleigh the wind struck him a foul blow, the drift poured over him, the storm beat him and howled like a fierce bully, but he struggled to the horses' heads and pulled them on the trail. Five minutes after they left it again. And a third time; and on the fourth break he stayed by the trail, trudging along in the blackness, feeling the way with

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his feet. But soon even this failed him. Wind and snow conspired to pack the drifts. Soon they bore his weight, and after that there was nothing to distinguish trail from prairie.

Still, with ever-increasing fury, the storm raged on. It seemed to him that he had been toiling for infinitely long periods of time through vast spaces, seeking a lost trail. At last, all tired out, he crawled back into the cutter. And now it was getting colder. His breath congealed in his beard, his eyelids froze together, the wind chilled him through his furs.

Once the twinkle of a distant light lifted him from black despair. He waited eagerly for a break in the drift. Again the bright pin-point pierced the darkness. It was the gable light on Brown's house—a cheery ray, significant of warmth and mirth and life. But, even as he turned the horses for it, a sudden eddy whirled up in the gable and dashed the lantern against the logs. Within, Slias heard the smash of shivering glass, and started, and far out on the prairie the usurer's team resumed their endless circling.

At break of day Tom Buchanan closed the door of his road-house on the Russel trail and strode off

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to do his chores. After feeding, he cleaned out the stables, then took a rope and fork to get some straw. At the corner of the stack-yard he paused and uttered a cry of surprise.

Under the lee of the stack a team stood, hitched to a fancy Portland cutter. The horses were furry with frost and snow, and were munching the dry straw with all the appetite of starving beasts, while in the cutter, silently watching them, sat a man. Even at that distance there was something strange in the dread intentness of his look; and, as he drew near, Tom saw that the sleigh was drifted full of snow. Cautiously approaching, he peered into the man's face.

"Fraser!" he exclaimed, drawing quickly back.

The usurer sat bolt upright. One mittened hand mutely offered a bulky envelope, in the stiff fingers of the other an indelible pencil was frozen fast. Stooping, Tom read the superscription, then slipped the packet in his pocket. And then, and not without a shudder, he stepped into the cutter, whirled the team, and drove rapidly to Russel.

### III

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!" saluted the sheriff, then paused. Silas was staring at him with lack-lustre



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eyes. "What ails you, man." continued the sheriff.

"Kedn't he wait one more day?" groaned the farmer. "May the curse—"

The sheriff held up a staying hand. "Hush, man!" he warned. "It's ill cursing the dead." But already the farmer's cry had filled the door with curious faces.

"Dead?" echoed Silas.

"Who? How? When? Where?" a dozen voices eagerly questioned.

"Donald Fraser!" answered the sheriff, laconically. "Las' night! The ol' thing! Off the trail—then, the white death."

A gush of feeling flooded the farmer's mind, and while his neighbors plied the sheriff he tried to catch an end of his tangled skein of thought. First, he felt immense relief. He caught himself thanking God for the usurer's death, and though he tried to smother the thought, like a half-scotched devil it kept thrusting upward. Then, with a sudden revulsion, despair seized him—the mortgage still held! And what brought Morris out on such a morning? Suspense was intolerable! Stepping before the sheriff, he said:

"I reckon, Harry, as ye didn't come out jes' to tell us thi—"



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Morris smiled. "Well—no, not exactly," he replied, fumbling in his pockets, "though my business ain't p'r'aps what you think. Sheriff's work 'd never bring me out on a Christmas morning. Ah! here it is!"

He drew forth a package and handed it to Silas, who took it with a trembling hand. "Come, come!" laughed the sheriff, clapping him on the shoulder. "Get inside, man, and open it."

All crowded round, eagerly expectant, but Silas hopelessly fumbled the packet with his stiff, cold fingers. "Here!" exclaimed the minister, impatiently, "give it to me, Mr. Brown!"

With a dexterous movement he slit the envelope. Within lay Silas's mortgage, with its long row of endorsements, extending over many a weary year. Written of his sweat and blood they were, in characters of red agony. But across the face of the deed, in the great scribble of a blind and feeble hand, the usurer had written, "Paid in full."

Who shall tell the thoughts of him that perishes at the hand of the frost-god? Perhaps, as the merciful drowsiness which heralds the white death crept on, the old man may have harked back to the springtime of his life? He may have seen his daughter's conduct in a kindlier light and cherished

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a tender thought for his erring son? And—who knows? As his stiffening fingers performed this last kind act, his dead wife may have reached forth from infinity and drawn him from the dross that he had made his god.

■



A DRUMMER OF THE QUEEN



## A DRUMMER OF THE QUEEN

**P**ATSEY DOOLAN was a small "son o' the widder." At her command he blew silvery calls from a brass bugle, receiving therefor the princely income of twopence per diem—less a half-penny a month, deducted for the services of the regimental barber. He also received, annually, two brand-new red uniforms, which turned the souls of civilian boys green with envy, and as much good, solid food as he could crowd into his small stomach.

A bright boy was Patsey. At least, so said Drum-Major O'Hooligan—a wise man, who could tell what a boy was thinking about by looking at him.

"It's a full-blooded colonel o' the quane Patsey 'll be when ye're carryin' coal to the married quarters av a Sathurday mornin'," O'Hooligan would say to the "Drums." "Listen, ye small sarpints!" And

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he would hold up his hand while Patsey made music of the "last post."

But it was possible to have too much of a good thing. The commendations of his superior officer got Patsey into pecks of trouble. After practice, the "Drums" would descend upon him in a body and mottle his small body with assorted shades of blue and black.

Patsey's regiment, the One Hundred and Tenth of the line, was stationed at the Curragh of Kildare, where rules a brigade-major with a will of iron and a soul of brass. He is known, is that major, from Cork to Cochin China and from the Cape to Kandahar. Men who have served under him renounce all other forms of abuse, and consign their enemies to the Curragh Camp; and whole regiments have been known to tremble at the mention of his name.

The One Hundred and Tenth had been ordered to the Curragh by way of penance for infractions of the peace of her Majesty the Queen. One black night in Limerick, in an ill-advised moment, they painted the statue of Daniel O'Connell a brilliant orange, and now they repented in sackcloth and ashes at the feet of Brigade-Major Cramp.

And the major did his best to bring the regiment to a knowledge of the errors of its ways. Vexatious

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night attacks upon imaginary enemies, while the rest of the command snored blissfully in the lines, made the temper of the regiment as raw as the back of a commissariat mule. Besides which, it was harried by the brigade-general, ordered to make extra route-marches by his chief of staff, and publicly anathematized by the commander-in-chief. To add insult to injury, the other regiments made insulting remarks anent the One Hundred and Tenth's predilections for painting and other arts of peace, until it rose in its wrath and smote them with belt and scabbard from A Lines to the Clock Tower. After which it was left severely alone.

When marching orders finally arrived at division headquarters for the One Hundred and Tenth, every man, from the colonel to the latest addition to the "Drums," hailed them as a release from purgatory. They did not know where they were going, and would not know until they got there, for the actions of the British War-Office are shrouded in mystery which may not be divined by a simple regiment of the line; but so long as it got out of the clutches of Brigade-Major Cramp, the regiment did not care if it was sent to Jericho.

It was in the spring of '85 when H. M. troop-ship



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*Jumna*, with the One Hundred and Tenth aboard, docked at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

"Just in time!" exclaimed the regiment when it heard of the rebellion of the Metis in the northwest; but an unkind Providence had decreed otherwise. The Dominion government undertook to quell the disturbance with its own militia, and the only assistance it asked of the Hundred and Tenth was the loan of a staff-officer.

There was joy in the "Drums" when they heard that the colonel was to take a bugler with him. Every boy in the lot was sure he would be the favored one. Even Jimmy Buck, who had just graduated from the married quarters, put in his plea.

"I'm so little," said he, "it wouldn't matter if they did pop me orf."

For several days the buglers found innumerable errands which carried them past the officers' quarters, and the colonel smiled as he noted the excessive whiteness of their facings, the mathematical exactness of their salutes, and the backward glances to note the effect.

"The 'Drums' would wipe out the rebellion alone," he chuckled to his major, but that officer received the remark with hauteur. He was suffer-

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ing under a sense of undeserved injury. It was certainly piggish of the colonel to monopolize the only chance of getting killed which had been offered the regiment in a decade.

The night before the colonel's departure the choice of a bugler had not yet been announced, and the "Drums" were torn with dissension almost to the pitch of mutiny. In the absence of the drum-major, a battle royal raged among the aspirants for service at the front. That officer, in blissful ignorance of the contention of his command, was closeted with the colonel.

"And you can recommend the Doolan boy, Drum-Major?"

"Blows the sweetest G in the corps, sir."

"Father and mother both dead, you say?"

"Ye'll remember Color-Sergeant Doolan, sir? Rest his soul!"

"Ah, to be sure." The colonel reverently raised his forage-cap. "Killed in that night attack in the Afghan hills in '78. A brave man."

The colonel leaned his head on his hand, and silence fell in the orderly room. The drum-major stood to attention and stared straight to his front. The Khyber Pass rose before them in all its savage grandeur, and into the minds of both flashed a

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picture of a ring of dead Ghurkas, and the body of the sergeant, slashed from shoulder to waist, lying in the midst.

"And the mother?"

"Died av fever, in the lines at Rawul-Pindi, sir."

"Very well, Drum-Major," said the colonel, closing his book. "Let him report at my quarters in marching order at eight, sharp, to-morrow morning."

Patsey paraded in the morning bearing upon his freckled face many marks of the "Drums" disapproval of the colonel's choice.

"Fighting?" asked the colonel.

"Bill Hogan 'it me, sir," said Patsey, apologetically. "An' I licked 'im."

"Why did he strike you?"

"'Cos I said I'd bring 'im 'ome a 'arf-breed scalp, sir."

"H'm!" said the colonel. "You'll be lucky if you bring back your own."

Then he contemplated with wonder the look of ecstasy which spread over the boy's face. "I believe the little beggars like to be killed," he thought. "It's born in 'em!"

Winnipeg was in a wild frenzy of excitement when the colonel, with Patsey in tow, reported at headquarters. Lean and lank settlers wandered up and

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down Main Street, or gathered in knots, eloquently descanting on what they would do if they were the government. Fugitives were pouring into the city in buckboards, ox-wagons, Red River carts, afoot and a-horse, bringing with them fresh tales of torture and rapine. Big Bear had massacred all the white men at Frog Lake, and carried off the women. It was said that Battleford had fallen. Lonely settlers had been overtaken in flight, killed, and scalped.

That very day a mounted policeman galloped in, worn and weary, reeling in his saddle, with the news of Crozier's defeat at Duck Lake. Riel was said to be advancing on Winnipeg. A bloody cloud of fear, smoke, and war, hung over the Great Lone Land, and the danger, magnified by common report out of all proportion, loomed terrible in the distance.

But the much-maligned government was doing its best to grapple with the situation. Raw levies of sturdy Scot-Canadians poured in fast as special trains could bring them through fifteen hundred miles of forest. Patsey inspected them as they arrived with a critical eye. He sauntered round their quarters, bestowing a commendation here, a stricture there, with all the assurance of a commander-in-chief on a field-day.

"A likely-lookin' lot," he observed, blandly; "but

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soldiers!"—with a sniff of 'mutterable contempt—"oh, crikey!" And having thus testified to their impossibility, judged by the superior standards of a drummer of the Line, he proceeded to inspect the drum-corps.

"Where's the 'Drums' quartered?" he asked of a big private of the Ninetieth Foot. The man stared. "The 'Drums'!" Patsey added, impatiently. "The buglers!"

The private surveyed the little red figure and laughed.

"Reckon it's the man thet blows the horn thet ye're wantin'." Patsey nodded. "Ye'll fin' him over there."

Patsey moved in the direction indicated, and was shocked to find that a long, lean bugler was the sole representative of the important branch of the service to which he belonged. But quickly recovering his equanimity, he commenced to examine the lone drummer concerning his qualifications for his office, and soon found that he had a most shocking habit of injecting a cracked C right into the centre of his quavery G.

"Listen, ye long sarpint," said Patsey, rising on his toes after the fashion of Drum-Major O'Hooligan, "while I sound ye a G!"

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The depth and fulness of that G haunted the long bugler until he almost burst a blood-vessel in futile attempts at imitation. And because of this tribute to his superiority, Patsey patronized the long bugler extensively, and had even a good word for the Ninetieth. "Though, of course, ye'll never be soldiers," he would add to his commendations.

The Ninetieth looked upon Patsey somewhat in the light of a good joke; so that when he was finally attached to them for mess purposes the arrangement was satisfactory to all parties. He shared with them the dangers and toils of the long march from Qu'Appelle, and was with them at Fish Creek when they engaged Riel's forces and drove them back upon Batoche.

On the evening of the second day's fighting at Batoche, a semicircle of red fires winked mockingly out of the black night at the breeds sullenly lying in their second line of defence. Around the fires lay the men of the Ninetieth, swapping experiences of the day's work. Here and there a man sat close up to the blaze, writing home—perhaps for the last time; and the firelight flickered on the faces of thoughtful men who knew that death lurked out in the rifle-pits. Between the Ninetieth and the enemy extended a long line of pickets, but the ut-

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most vigilance could not prevent straggling snipers from dropping an occasional bullet into camp.

Patsey squatted at one of the fires, heating tea in a canteen, and kept up a running comment on the manoeuvring of the Ninetieth.

"Ye didn't keep your distances," he remarked, sagely. "Lot o' bloomin' sheep!"

The long bugler withdrew his cleaning-rod from his rifle and squinted down the barrel. "Guess she'll do," he said, snapping the breech. "Say, boys, did ye see Patsey standin' behind the general's hoss?"

"Out o' range, too," said another man, with a wink.

"Proper place fer the reg'lars," said a third.

"Where else 'd I be, ye 'arf-baked lobsters?" replied Patsey, with superior calmness. "Yer wouldn't 'a' knowed where to go if I 'adn't tooted yer orders."

"Tooted us inter the rifle-pits from long range, Patsey? Ye're brave!"

The lad lifted the canteen from the glowing coals and opened his mouth to reply. A rifle flashed beyond the pickets, and a whizzing bullet sent the tin flying from his hand. The hot tea splashed all over the men. They jumped to their feet and rushed for their rifles.

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"Here," said the long bugler, "we've got ter get that feller! Are ye hurt, boy?"

But Patsey had seized a rifle and slipped off in the darkness.

"'Fraid, am I?" he muttered. "I'll show 'em!"

He lay flat on his belly and wormed his way between the pickets; but, once outside the line, he rose to his feet and moved rapidly across the prairie. Looking back, he could see the red fires, and black figures passing between; and he heard the long bugler cautioning the pickets not to let "the little red drummer go by." A rifle flashed about a hundred yards ahead, and the bullet hummed along its path of death just above his head. He dropped on his hands and knees, and crept towards the flash.

"I'll wait till I get within twenty yards of the beggar," he thought. "Then I'll plug 'im!"

He wiggled over the grass towards the concealed marksman. Once more the rifle flashed—this time only fifty yards away. Patsey crept a little nearer and waited. He thought he could see a dim figure through the darkness, but dared not fire. He waited for the flash. At last it came. He sighted for the very centre of the white smoke dimly rising in the blackness, and pulled trigger.



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Blinding fire flashed from the breech of his rifle. A crashing sound rent his brain, and he plunged forward and lay still.

For a few minutes after the bursting of the little bugler's rifle, silence reigned over the prairie. Then two figures loomed out of the night and bent over the boy. One of the men picked up the shattered weapon.

"Thought as much, Jean. Plugged muzzle. Run it inter the sand, I guess. Breech blown right out."

"By Gar! Luckee for me," said the other. "'E vas onlee twenty paces off. Take up hees feet, Baptiste."

"Why, it's a boy!" exclaimed the other. "Poor leetle beggar—a bugler. Here's hees horn."

When consciousness slowly filtered back, Patsey found himself lying in a smoke-blackened tepee. His temples throbbed with pain, and the blood still flowed from a cut beneath his eye, but otherwise he was none the worse for his mishap. He sat up and took note of his surroundings.

A man sat writing at a rough table by the light of a cotton flare. As Patsey looked upon him, a vague idea that he had seen the fellow before entered his mind, and he looked, and looked again,

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tryir ; to place him. From the man's straight eyebrows rose a high forehead crowned with bristling hair. His lips were thin, his cheeks hollow, and his nose long and straight. Wild eyes, hot with the fires of fanaticism, gleamed from his pale face. He glanced quickly up when the boy moved, and then Patsey recognized him from a portrait he had seen in Winnipeg—it was Louis Riel.

"Who are you?" Riel spoke in quick, harsh tones.

"Patsey Doolan, sir."

"What regiment?"

"One Hundred and Tenth of the Line," replied Patsey, proudly swelling his chest. "Attached to the Ninetieth Winnipeg Rifles."

"Ah, a regular. Bugler?"

"Yes, sir."

Riel bit the end of his pen and stared at the boy; but Patsy could see that the wild eyes were seeing other things. For a full minute he stared, then the eyelids drooped and a sinister expression shot across his face.

"We'll find you something to do to-morrow," he said, and turned again to his writing.

Patsey watched for a while. Indian runners slipped in and out, bringing and taking messages.

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Riel would glance up, give a quick order, and plunge again into his writing. Gradually the boy commenced to nod; he heard the voices as in the distance, then he dropped into a sound sleep.

When he awoke, the gray lights of the early morning were stealing into the tent, but Riel still sat busily writing. When the boy moved, the half-breed leader struck his open hand smartly on the table. An Indian stepped to the door.

"Send Laval here, We-weep!" He spoke in Cree.

Riel sat nervously biting the end of his pen, until a heavy step sounded on the outside. The flap of the tent flew back, and a big breed swaggered in. He glanced at the boy's red coat, and scowled. Patsey shrank instinctively back. Brute was marked on every line of the man's pock-marked visage; his eyes squinted out, yet the boy could feel the malevolent glare concentrated full upon him.

The two men whispered together, glancing over their shoulders. At last Riel spoke aloud.

"Listen, boy," he said. "Go with this man. Do everything he tells you, or—" A cruel smile writhed his thin lips.

The breed grabbed the boy's collar and jerked him roughly to his feet. A cloth was tied over his eyes, and he was led out of the tent. For nearly a

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mile he stumbled along beside his companion. He could hear men talking, sometimes in English, more often in French, and then again he recognized the gutturals of the Cree. Suddenly he felt himself raised from his feet and dropped into a hole. As he fell his hands flew instinctively to the bandage that blinded him, and he tore it off.

He was in a rifle-pit, the centre of a long line extending as far as the eye could reach to the right and left. In the next pit was Laval, and all along the line he could see the heads of the swarthy breeds peering through the embrasures of the pits. Just then his attention was attracted by the sound of a British bugle, and, peeping through his loop-hole, he saw the Canadian forces deploying for battle. Again the bugle sounded the "right extend," and Patsey grinned with pleasure as a shrill C split up the quavery G. Once more he glanced along the line of pits. The breeds were sighting through the loop-holes and muttering curses on the slow-moving troops.

The blaring bugle brought him back to his loop-hole in a hurry. The Canadians were advancing. He could see the black uniforms of the Ninetieth dodging from bush to bush. Away to the right, Boulton's Horse were swinging out for a wide flank-

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ing movement. Grasset's Grenadiers deployed on the left, and the Midlanders covered the Ninetieth.

A stir in the next pit attracted his attention. Laval was looking through the sights of his long rifle. A thin spume of smoke shot from the embrasure, followed by a sharp report—the battle had commenced.

Three long hours Patsey lay in his pit watching the advance. Sometimes a screaming hail from Howard's Gatling swept over him, and then a rifle-bullet would plump into his parapet, but none happened to find his loop-hole. He trembled with joy as his friends drew gradually nearer in the face of the destructive fire. As the day wore on, a thick cloud of smoke hung over the pits, and the sulphurous fumes of burned powder almost choked him. From the yellow Tophet arose the wild yells of the fierce Metis, the war-whoops of the savage Crees, and the death-screams of hard-hit men.

Patsey watched Laval's movements with intense interest. He did not fire very often, but every time his rifle cracked a man in black pitched forward. As the troops drew nearer, the breed began to get excited. He muttered wild curses and his squint-eyes rested on Patsey with a look of deadly hatred.

Late in the afternoon the Canadians got well with-

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in charging distance. Patsey wondered why they did not charge; but, looking out, he saw the officers holding them back. At length they could hold their men no longer. The soldiers were slipping by and taking up more advanced ground. Patsey made out the long body of the Ninetieth bugler slipping from bush to bush.

"Boy!"

He glanced up in quick surprise. He had forgotten Laval.

"Take your bugle and sound the 'Retreat.'"

Patsey stared. "The 'Retreat,' sir?" he stammered.

"Yes. Put your bugle to that loop-hole and blow for your life."

Laval's rifle rose slowly, and the boy looked right into the little black muzzle.

The meaning of the order suddenly flashed upon him. He was to stop the charge of the Canadians, and bring the day's fighting to naught. His soul rose hot within him, and a blank refusal trembled on his lips. Then an inspiration came to him.

"All right, sir," he answered, cheerfully.

"Thought that 'd fix you," growled the breed, lowering his rifle.

The lad peeped through the embrasure as he

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swung the bugle from under his arm. The men were still slipping past the protesting officers. He raised the bugle, and with all the might that was in him sounded the charge!

Loud and clear and shrill, the notes carried far over the prairie. Away on the hill where stood the general staff the colonel started as he recognized the bugle's clear tones. From the fighting-line burst a howl of fierce pleasure, and it rose as one man and shot into the deadly zone of fire.

Patsey saw the long bugler spring from behind a bush and dash towards him; then, mad with excitement, he leaped upon the parapet of his pit and cheered the Ninetieth on. The men saw the little red figure, and then saw that which, for one second, paralyzed their charge. The giant figure of Laval rose from the pit behind the boy. A cry of impotent anguish burst from the lips of the long bugler as he covered the ground with giant strides. The breed's rifle rose in the air and fell. The little red figure quivered beneath the stroke, and dropped, limp and lifeless.

The next minute the slipping bayonet of the long bugler had avenged his death. The Ninetieth, the Midlanders, and Grassett's poured into the pits like a black flood of death, and many a breed paid in

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full measure for Laval's evil stroke. Ten minutes of lively fighting, and then Boulton's Horse smashed the right flank like a pane of glass. The breeds broke and fled—the rebellion of the Metis was over.

"Who ordered those men to charge?" exclaimed the general, when the wild yell rose to the hill.

"No one, sir," replied his chief of staff.

But the men of the Ninetieth know who ordered that charge. Orders and decorations, knighthoods and crosses, rewarded the men on the hill for the great deeds they had—not done. And Patsey also got his cross. Before the men of the Ninetieth returned to their lonely prairie farms they placed a wooden cross at the head of a little grave; and deep in the wood, the loving hands of the long bugler cut Patsey's name, a bugle, and the regimental arms of the Ninetieth.

And on the anniversary of Batoche, the gray-haired colonel rises to his feet in the officers' mess of the One Hundred and Tenth, and, after "Her Majesty," he glances round the board at the officers standing with bowed heads, and says:

"Gentlemen, I give you Patsey Doolan, a Drummer of the Queen."

And from his place in the band Drum-Major O'Hooligan utters a fervent "Rest his soul!"





THE FRECKLED FOOL



## THE FRECKLED FOOL

TWO boys sat at the end of a ridge which, hog-like, shovels its long snout under the waters of White Man's Lake. Behind them the Manitoba prairie lay scorching brown in the hot September sun, and across the lake stretched the vast forests of the Riding Mountains. A silvery line of dwarf birch straggled along the opposite shore, and from the high, steep banks giant spruce and stately poplar cast long shadows over the still shore-waters.

The boys were quiet. The elder, a freckle-faced, blue-eyed lad of fourteen, flung pebbles with a vicious snap at a cheeky diver, while the younger, a red-skinned Cree, stared with black, solemn eyes at the whirling autumn leaves which checkered the lake with vivid patches of crimson, brown, and yellow.

The Indian boy touched his companion on the shoulder and pointed to the water, working his arms like a frog

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"Swim, is it?"

The Cree lad nodded. Slipping cellike from his blanket, he stepped forth in the sunshine, bare, lithe, and brown. In ten seconds his friend had shed ragged shirt and breeches, and stood beside him, a dozen angry-looking bruises marring the whiteness of his skin. The Indian uttered a clucking exclamation of pity and astonishment.

"*Mooniah*<sup>1</sup> do that?" he asked.

"Yes."

The soft moose-eyes opened wider. The little fellow gazed pityingly for nearly a minute; then his lips opened with a snap.

"Neshota kill him—that man!" he said, viciously.

A cheerful grin gleamed on the victim's face. "W'y," he replied, with a strong Cockney accent, "'e'd smash yer like a full skeeter, Neshota. This"—touching his back—"ain't much. Yer orter see the w'y they paints a feller in W'itechapel. Come on!" he shouted, rushing into the lake. "Let's swim!"

The Cree's brown body clove the water with scarcely a splash, and they were soon in the centre of the lake, diving and floating, looking for all the

<sup>1</sup>"White man" (Cree).

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world like a pair of black-and-white whoohaugh cranes.

"I ain't goin' back any more," gasped the white boy, treading water.

Neshota spurted a mouthful of spray into the air. "You come me," he said, with great gravity. "We kill him—that man!"

While the boys laved in the cool waters of the lake, Silas Peters's ramshackle buckboard rattled over the baked prairie towards the log school. Si was going to meeting. He was a tall, gaunt Scottish Canadian; keen, shrewd, and ginger-tempered, a driving worker and ferociously religious. As he rode along, the sun smote down on his head, the suffocating alkali dust filled his nostrils, and the mosquitoes settled behind his ears; but he sat motionless, stoical as an Indian, hugging to his fierce soul an indefinite feeling of persecuted righteousness. The buggy rounded a poplar-bluff and passed a man who was swinging along the trail.

Silas pulled up. "Jump in, Bill," he said. "Pretty warm walkin'."

Bill Chittock sank back on the seat with a sigh of relief.

"Hot!" he gasped. "I sh'd swan! Ye're travelin' light, Si. Where's Ben?"

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"Run away."

"You don't say! What's wrong?"

"Lazy, an' I warmed his jacket a leetle. All them Barnardo boys is lazy," he grumbled. "Don't see what they want'er be shippin' 'em out here for, pes-terin' hard-workin' folk. Why don't they keep 'em in Lunnon, where they belong?"

Bill glanced sideways at the hard, black visage. Silas Peters was reputed to be expert at the game of coining human labor into hard cash, and noted for his cruelty to his boys.

"Ain't ye just a leetle hard on the kid?" he ventured, allowing his gaze to travel around the horizon.

"Nopel!" snapped Silas. "The freckle-faced little fool's no good. 'Spare the rod an' spoil the child' is a good maxim, neighbor, an' one as I allus live right up to."

The sermon had little interest for Bill Chittock that Sunday. The voice of the minister sounded afar off, and the face of the slum child, pathetic in its loneliness, floated before him. His eyes moistened as he pictured his own Jack orphaned in a strange land. Nor was Silas Peters a good listener. While the preacher dwelt on man's duty to his brother, Si thought of the stripes he had dealt the runaway, fiercely regretting the smallness of the

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measure; but when the morning came to the unconverted he straightened up in his seat, heard every word, and applied them to the absent sinner.

"Spare the rod an' spoil the child," he muttered, as he jogged homeward. "The boy's lazy. I'll fix him."

"Mother," said Bill Chittock, over the supper-table, "Peters ain't doin' right by that Barnardo boy. A young hoss shouldn't be put to a heavy dro'r, nor a lad to a man's work."

"Well, I allus said as Mr. Peters wuz as hard as flint," snapped his wife. "He ain't fit to have a beast under him, let alone a boy. I declare, it makes me real hot to hear him pray in meetin'."

"Steady, ol' lady! Steady!" said Bill, softly. "There's none wi'out faults. Don't be uncharitable, missis."

"I ain't, Bill. It's true, an' charity begins at home. So there! It's too bad"—she banged the milk-pans unmercifully—"to see them poor waifs ill-treated. Keep an eye open for the poor lad, Bill."

"All right," replied Bill, and he picked up his pails and walked off to the milking.

The lodge-fire in front of Estahagan's tepee died to a glowing coal, and from within came the regular



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breathing of tired sleepers. The moon had just topped the north bank of White Man's Lake, and threw a silvery path of light across the sullen waters. In the restless, sighing, gloomy woods, a night-owl hooted; the weird wail of a loon sounded down the lake, and the still air pulsed to the distant howl of a wandering wolf.

The bull's hide moved noiselessly aside, and Neshota slipped through the opening. Squatting by the fire, he stared across the lake into the black forest. A puff of wind rippled the waters. He leaned forward with dilated nostrils, his eyes shining red in the firelight like those of a prowling lynx, and his ear caught and interpreted the rustle in the woods. Once more the vibrant howl carried down the wind. The boy turned to listen. He sprang to his feet; against the black northern sky shone a thin red line. A shrill whoop burst from his lips, and before the woods had ceased their mocking Estahagan and his squaw were standing in the open.

"Waugh!" grunted the old man. "Big fire! Plenty burn"

Neshota slipped into the lodge and shook his friend.

"Lemme 'lone!" growled Ben. "It ain't five

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yet. Lemme—what? Fire?" He leaped up and ran out with his thoughts in a confused jumble.

The four stood silently watching the conflagration. A wet spring and a hot summer had forced a luxuriant growth on the prairie. The cropping buffalo were gone, the ranch herds had not yet arrived, and over twenty thousand square miles there waved eighteen inches of dried grass ready for the burning. The whole northern horizon now glowed redly, and forked flames leaped skyward through lurid clouds of smoke.

Ben looked at his companions. He was nervous and excited. Prairie fires do not run in London slums, and this one looked hot. The old Cree was keen, grave, attentive; the squaw's heavy face was as calm as a copper mask. She put one hand on her boy's shoulder and watched the fire. Neshota displayed more emotion. His eyes sparkled blackly, and his white teeth gleamed through his parted lips. He looked at Ben, and stood, a small, brown, malicious imp, pointing westward.

"Him burn plenty soon—that *mooniah!*" he said, vindictively. "Him sleep. Good!"

For a moment a feeling of fierce pleasure possessed the white boy. The bruises beneath his shirt pained dully, and here was a fiery revenge racing across the

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prairie. Then into his mind flashed the picture of a burning London rookery. He saw flames spout through windows and lick the white night-gear from shrieking women and heard the agonized cries of roasting men. Then, with a swift transition, the face of Silas Peters appeared, black, hopeless, agonized, framed in smoke and fire. He threw up his hands.

"Come!" he shouted.

The Crees stared. They had seen the boy's bruised flesh, which surely called for killing; but if it pleased the Great Spirit to take the matter in hand, why should they interfere with his just decree? The white papoose was surely fire-mad!

Ben laid his hand on Neshota's arm. The boy shook his head.

"No," he snapped. "Him beat you, that blackface! . . . Him burn! Good!"

Ben glanced appealingly to Estahagan, but the old man stood like a bronze, cold, stern, immovable, the light of the distant fires shining redly on his wrinkled face. What was it to him if the incumbents of his birthright died the fiery death?

The boy turned and ran wildly across the prairie. He had covered almost a hundred yards when rapid hoof-beats sounded behind. A pony shot by

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and then almost fell as the rider suddenly pulled it down on its haunches.

"Come," said Neshota, leaning over. "Quick!"

Ben mounted behind, and the pony stretched on a long, loping gallop into the west. They were riding across the front of the fire, which now raced along about three miles to the northward. Light smoke-clouds flew by, the pungent odor of burning grass stung their nostrils, and an occasional puff of hot wind smote them on the cheek. A mile west lay the log shanty of Silas Peters, and half a mile farther south the cabin of Bill Chittock. For nearly ten minutes the boys held steadily on. Once the pony plunged into a badger-hole and sent them sprawling, but they were up on the instant and off.

"Look!" Neshota pointed north

The freshening breeze had blown the red line into a vast flaming triangle, the apex of which swept south and the sides outward. Almost as he spoke a black mass loomed against the blazing point, then flared into a pillar of fire, illumining the prairie for miles around.

"Peters's 'ay stacks," muttered Ben.

Half a mile ahead, the shanty stood up against the reddish brown of the lighted plain; only a mile to the north the fire leaped and crackled. The

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bronco covered the distance with steady strides, spun round a bluff without slackening speed, and shot up the rise. The house was dark and quiet. Ben jumped from the pony and hammered the door.

"Fire!" he shouted. "Come out! Fire!"

The shanty trembled as the man leaped from his bed. There was a stir and shuffle inside, the door flew open, and Silas strode out without waiting to put on hat or shoes.

"You, is it?" he growled.

He stared at the running fire, then ran round the front of the house. Ben followed slowly. When he turned the corner Silas was on his knees, striking a match. The boy stared. Then the meaning dawned upon him—the man was going to fight fire with fire, regardless of the hazard of his neighbors.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Silas glanced up. "What's the matter wi' you?" he snarled. "Lookin' for another lickin'?" The match flickered out, but he struck another.

"Stop, I say!" repeated the boy. "You'll burn up Chittock's! Give me time to warn 'em!"

"Shet up!" yelled Silas. "It's me or them!"

He bent over the match, shielding it from the wind. Ben slipped off his cap. The crimson light

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gleamed on his fair hair. To the south he could see Chittock's shanty, quiet and still, and he knew that a dry chip pile led from the grass to the very wall. He threw the cap with all his force, and struck the match from the man's hand.

Peters sprang to his feet, his black face convulsed with passion. "Ye freckle-faced little devil!" he roared. "I'll kill ye!"

He rushed at the boy and struck savagely. As Ben fell, a piercing yell rang out. A brown mass swept around the corner and smote the man with tremendous force. He was thrown twenty feet, and lay fighting for his breath while Ben struggled to his feet.

Neshota leaned over and held out his hand. "Quick!" he exclaimed. "Blackface up plenty soon!"

As they shot down the slope to the south, Si Peters rose from the ground. Looking back, Ben saw his figure outlined against the red sky, black, portentous, threatening. His fist was raised in menace for a moment, then he bent over. A flickering flame sprang up under his hand, widened, and raced down the slope after the running pony.

The double load and the fast pace were telling on the bronco, and though Neshota scored his

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flanks with a pliant willow, the beast dropped into a walk. Over his shoulder Ben saw the main fire divide and slip by the burned ground around the shanty; then, reunited, it swept like a red death after the fire of Silas Peters. He slid to the ground.

"Lick 'im up!" he yelled, hoarsely. "You'll make it alone!"

His voice sounded like a whisper amid the roar of the flames, but Neshota understood. He hesitated. Ben decided for him. He struck the bronco sharply on the flank, and the beast plunged forward and vanished in the smoke.

Crouching close to the ground to get the purer air, the boy struck a match and fired the grass. It caught, and a tongue of flame shot forward, leaving a rift of blackened soil between two lines of fire. He crept upon the burned path and followed, almost choked with smoke and heat. The sweat dried on his skin, and the skin blistered and burned. Burning embers sailed through the air and dropped around, but with head close to the ground he crept steadily on.

Twenty square yards of burned prairie protected him when the fire flashed by. For a second, earth and sky blazed. A leaping, soaring, searing, crack-

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ling wave rolled over him, leaving everything black, smoky, smudgy, acrid. He raised his face from between his hands and tore off his burning shirt. His hands and knees were seared by the hot embers, he was sooty from head to foot, but, heedless of his own pain, he staggered to his feet and peered through the smoke towards Chittock's.

A fiery ring was eating outward from the shanty, and within the circle dark figures rushed to and fro. And even as he looked the red death shot by, leaving the cabin standing on the black prairie. This he saw, and then the ground began to heave wildly beneath him. Chittock's cabin danced madly to and fro across the horizon. He tried to steady himself, and spent the dregs of his strength in the effort. He fell forward on his face.

Twenty minutes afterwards Bill Chittock picked up the fire-scarred body and carried it gently home. The burned hands and feet were smothered in baking-soda and swathed in cotton batting, but the sun had peeped over the horizon on a black and smudgy desert before Ben recovered consciousness. His opening eyes rested on Mother Chittock tenderly bathing his blistered face, and Neshota sat on the floor watching with solemn eyes.

"Feeling better, deary?"



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Ben nodded and grinned with delight at Neshota's grave face. The little Cree slipped across the floor and squatted by the bed. The door opened and Bill Chittock walked in.

"McDonal'd's burned out, I reckon," he said; "but Peters's shanty's there yet."

"More's the pity," snapped his wife.

"Steady, ol' lady!" said Bill, softly. "Don't be uncharitable."

"I ain't, Bill Chittock. Ye sh'd jest see that poor boy's back layed!" she snorted, angrily. "Give me," she continued, laying her hand kindly on Neshota's shoulder, "a brown skin afore a black heart, an' a freckled face with a white soul."

Neshota glanced up in surprise. His eyes glowed.

"Squaw good!" he muttered. "But I kill him—that man!"

A SON OF COPPER SIN



## A SON OF COPPER SIN

**W**ITHIN his bull's-hide tepee, old Iz-le-roy lay and fed his little fire, stick by stick. He was sick, very sick—sick with the sickness which is made up of equal parts of hunger, old age, fever, and despair. Just one week before his tribe had headed up for Winnipegosis, where the whitefish may be had for the taking and the moose winter in their yards. But a sick man may not travel the long trail, so Iz-le-roy had remained at White Man's Lake. And Batiste, his son, stayed also. Not that it was expected of him, for, according to forest law, the man who cannot hunt had better die; but Batiste had talked with the gentle priest of Ellice, and had chosen to depart from the custom of his fathers.

And things had gone badly, very badly, since the tribe had marched. North, south, east, and west, the round of the plains, and through the leafless

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woods, the boy had hunted without so much as a jack-rabbit falling to his gun. For two days no food had passed their lips, and now he was gone forth to do that which Iz-le-roy had almost sooner die than have him do—ask aid of the settlers.

"Yea, my son," the old warrior had faltered, "these be they that stole the prairies of our fathers. Yet it may be that Big Laugh, best of an evil brood, will give us of his store of flour and bacon."

So, after placing a plentiful stock of wood close to the old man's hand, Batiste had closed the tepee flap and laced it. At the end of an hour's fast walking, during which the northern sky grew dark with the threat of still more cruel weather, he sighted through the drift a spurting column of smoke.

The smoke marked the cabin of John Sterling, and also his present occupation. Within, John sat and fired the stove, while Avis, his daughter, set out the breakfast dishes, and his wife turned the sizzling bacon in the pan.

"I declare," exclaimed the woman, pausing, knife in hand, "if the bread ain't froze solid!"

"Cold last night," commented Sterling. "Put it in the oven, Mary."

As she stooped to obey, the door quietly opened and Batiste slipped in. His moose moccasins made

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no noise, and he was standing close beside her when she straightened. She jumped and gasped:

"Lor' 'a' mercy! How you do scare one! Why don't you knock?"

Batiste stared. It was the custom of his tribe thus to enter a house—a custom established before jails were built or locks invented. His eye therefore roamed questioningly from one to another until Sterling asked:

"What d' you want, young fellow?"

Batiste pointed to the frying-pan. "Ba-kin!" he muttered. "The ba-kin of Big Laugh, I want. Iz-le-roy sick, plenty sick. Him want flour, him want ba-kin."

The thought of his father's need flashed into his mind, and, realizing the impossibility of expressing himself in English, he broke into a voluble stream of Cree, punctuating its rolling gutturals with energetic signs. While he was speaking, Avis ceased rattling her dishes.

"He looks awful hungry, dad," she whispered as Batiste finished.

Now, though Sterling was a large-souled, generous man, and jovial—as evidenced by his name of Big Laugh—it happened that, during the past summer, a roving band of Sioux had camped hard by and

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begged him out of patience. That morning, too, the threatening weather had spoiled an intended trip to Russel and touched his temper—of which he had a good man's share.

"Can't help it, girl!" he snapped. "If we feed every hungry Injun that comes along, we'll soon be out of house an' home. Can't do anything for you, boy."

"Him want ba-kin," Batiste said.

"Well, you can just want."

"Iz-le-roysick, him want ba-kin," the boy pleaded.

His persistence irritated Sterling, and, crowding down the better feeling which spoke for the lad, he sprang up, threw wide the door, and shouted:

"Get, you son of copper sin! Get, now! Quick!"

"Father!" pleaded the girl.

But he took no heed, and held wide the door.

Into Batiste's face flashed surprise, anger, and resentment. Surprise, because he had not believed all the things Iz-le-roy had told him of the white men, but had preferred to think them all like Father Francis. But now? His father was right. They were all cold and merciless, their hearts hard as their steel axe-heads, their tongues sharp as the cutting-edge. With head held high he marched through the door, away from the hot

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stove, the steaming coffee, and the delicious smell of frying bacon, out into the cold storm.

"Oh, father!" remonstrated his wife, as Sterling closed the door.

"Look here, Mary!" he answered, testily. "We fed a whole tribe last summer, didn't we?"

"But this lad didn't belong to them," she pleaded.

"All the worse," he rejoined. "Do an i .jun a good turn an' he never forgets. Give him his breakfast, an' he totes his tribe along to dinner."

"Well," sighed the good woman, "I'm real sorry."

For a few moments both were silent. And presently, as the man's kindly nature began to triumph over his irritation, he hitched uneasily in his chair. Already he felt ashamed. Casting a sheepish glance at his wife, he rose, walked to the door, and looked out. But a wall of whirling white blocked his vision—Batiste was gone beyond recall.

"Where's Avis?" he asked, returning to the stove.

"A-vis!" called her mother.

But there was no answer. For a moment man and wife stared each other in the eye; then, moved by a common impulse, they walked into the kitchen. There, on the table, lay the half of a fresh-cut side



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of bacon; the bread-box was open and a crusty loaf missing; the girl's shawl was gone from its peg and her overshoes from their corner.

"Good God!" gasped the settler. "The child's gone after him!"

They knew the risk. All morning the storm had been brewing, and now it thundered by, a veritable blizzard. The blizzard! King of storms! It compelled the settler to string a wire from house to stables, it sets men circling in the snow, it catches little children coming home from school and buries them in monstrous drifts.

Without another word Sterling wound a scarf about his neck, grabbed his badger mitts, and rushed outside.

When Avis softly closed the kitchen door she could just see Batiste rounding a bluff that lay a furlong west of her father's stables. She started after him; but by the time she had covered half the distance a sea of white swept in between and blotted him from view. Then she ought to have turned; but she pushed on, hoping for a break in the scud. She never even made the bluff. The furious wind walled her about with fleecy clouds; unconsciously she bore off to the left, and was soon travelling on the arc of a wide circle.

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And when she found that she had missed the bluff, and tried to retrace her steps, the drift had filled her tracks. Somewhere near by, she knew, ran the Russel trail, a hard, well-beaten road, packed level with the topmost snow. If she could only strike it! So she turned to the right and turned to the left, but one turn offset the other and the leftward swing kept her ever on the circle. Thus she struggled on, and on, and still on, until, in spite of the seventy degrees of frost, the perspiration burst from every pore and the scud melted on her glowing face. This was well enough—so long as she kept moving; but when the time came that she must stop, she would freeze all the quicker for her present warmth.

This, being born and bred of the prairie, Avis knew, and the knowledge kept her toiling, toiling on, until her tired legs and leaden feet compelled a pause in the shelter of a bluff. She was hungry, too. All this time she had carried the bread and meat, and now, unconscious of a pair of slant eyes which glared from a willow thicket, she broke the loaf and began to eat. While she ate, the green lights in the eyes flared brighter, a long red tongue licked the drool from grinning jaws, and forth from his covert stole a lank, gray wolf.

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Avis uttered a startled cry. This was no coyote, to be chased with a stick, but a wolf of timber stock, a great beast, heavy, prick eared, strong as a mastiff. His nose puckered in a wicked snarl as he slunk in half-circles across her front. He was undecided. So, while he circled, trying to make up his mind, drawing a little nearer at every turn, Avis fell back—back towards the bluff, keeping her white face always to the creeping beast.

It was a small bluff, lacking a tree large enough to climb, but sufficient for her purpose. On its edge she paused, threw the bacon to the wolf, and then ran desperately. Once clear of the scrub, she ran on, plunging through drifts, stumbling, falling, to rise again and push her flight. Of direction she took no heed; her only thought was to place distance between herself and the red-mouthed brute. But when, weary and breathless, she paused for rest, out of the drab drift stole the lank, gray shadow.

The brute crouched a few yards away, licking his sinful lips, winking his devil eyes. She still had the loaf. As she threw it, the wolf sprang and snapped it in mid-air. Then she ran, and ran, and ran, as the tired doe runs from the hounds. For what seemed to her an interminable time,

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though it was less than five minutes, she held on; then stopped, spent, unable to take another step. Looking back, she saw nothing of the wolf; but just when she began to move slowly forward, thinking he had given up the chase, a gray shape loomed right ahead.

Uttering a bitter cry, she turned once more, tottered a few steps, and fainted.

As, wildly calling his daughter's name, Sterling rushed by his stables, the wind smote him with tremendous power. Like a living thing it buffeted him about the ears, tore at his breath, poured over him an avalanche of snow. Still he pressed on, and gained the bluff which Avis missed.

As he paused to draw a free breath, his eye picked out a fresh-made track. Full of a sudden hope, he shouted. A voice answered, and as he rushed eagerly forward a dark figure came through the drift to meet him. It was Batiste.

"What you want?" he asked.

Sterling was cruelly disappointed, but he answered quickly: "You see my girl? Yes, my girl," he repeated, noting the lad's look of wonder.

"Young white squaw, you see um?"

"*Mooniah* papoose?" queried Batiste.

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"Yes, yes! She follow you. Want give you bread, want give you bacon. All gone, all lost!" Sterling finished with a despairing gesture.

"Squaw marc! to me? Ba-kin for me?" questioned Batiste.

"Yes, yes!" cried Sterling, in a flurry of impatience.

Batiste's dark eyes softened, and he gave vent to low cluckings of distress. Then, striding out from the bluff, he motioned Sterling to follow. Straight as the wild duck's flight the boy led on, while the man followed, wondering. To him all points of the compass were alike; yet the Cree moved confidently through the smother, planting one foot directly before the other, Indian fashion, so that a line drawn along his trail would have cut the centre of every track. Once, passing through a slough, he stooped and fingered the long grass which poked through the snow, and then Sterling remembered that the first storm of the season had fixed it north and south. Shortly after, Batiste stopped and sniffed the air.

"What's the matter?" shouted the man.

"Smell um smoke," Batiste answered.

Swinging a little to the right, he bore off north-east, and in a few minutes landed the settler at his

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own door. Avis had not returned, and her mother sat trembling by the stove. On her husband's entrance she jumped up, wailing:

"It's a judgment on us! It's a judgment on us, John, for turning out that boy! Why, there he is!" she gasped, as Batiste followed in.

"I find um," he said, softly.

"Not till you've drunk some coffee," Sterling interposed, for the boy was again making for the door. "Fix him a cup, mother."

While the boy sipped, the man paced uneasily to and fro, and the mother listened, shuddering, to the thunder of the storm. Both sighed with relief when he set down the cup.

"Well?" interrogated Sterling.

Briefly Batiste laid down his plan, eking out his scanty English with vivid signs. In snow, the white man rolls along like a clumsy buffalo, planting his feet far out to the right and left. And because his right leg steps a little longer than the left, he always, when lost, travels in a circle. Wherefore Batiste indicated that they would move along parallel lines, just shouting-distance apart, so as to cover the largest possible ground.

"Young squaw marche slow. She there!" He pointed north and east with a gesture so sure and

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certain that the mother uttered a low cry and the father stepped involuntarily towards the door. "Yes, there!"

In front of the cabin Batiste paused until Sterling got his distance; then, keeping the wind slanting to his left cheek, he moved off north and east. Ever and anon he stopped to give forth a piercing yell. If Sterling answered, he moved on; if not—as happened twice—he travelled in his direction until they were once more in touch. And so, shouting and yelling, they bore off north and east for a long half-hour.

After that, Batiste began to throw his cries both east and west, for he judged that they must be closing on the girl. And suddenly, from the north, came a weird, tremulous answer. He started, and, throwing up his head, emitted the wolf's long howl. Leaning forward, he waited—his very soul in his ears—until, shrill yet deep-chested and quivering with ferocity, came back the answering howl.

No coyote gave forth that cry, and Batiste knew it.

"Timber wolf!" he muttered.

Turning due north, he gave the settler a warning yell, then sped like a hunted deer in the direction of the cry. He ran with the long, lithe lope which

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tires down even the swift elk, and in five minutes covered nearly a mile. Once more he gave forth the wolf-howl. An answer came from close by, but as he sprang forward it ended with a frightened yelp. Through a break in the drift he spied a moving figure; then a swirl swept in and blotted it from view.

But he had seen the girl. A dozen leaps and he was close upon her. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, she screamed and plunged headlong.

When consciousness returned, Avis was lying in her own bed. Her mother bent over her; Sterling stood near by. All around were the familiar things of life, but her mind still retained a vivid picture of her flight, and she sprang up screaming:

"The wolf! Oh, the wolf!"

"Hush, dearie," her mother soothed. "It wasn't a wolf, but just the Cree boy."

Batiste had told how she screamed at the sight of his gray, snow-covered blanket, and the cry had carried even to her father. But when she recovered sufficiently to tell her story, the father shuddered and the mother exclaimed:

"John, we owe that boy more than ever we can pay!"

"We do!" he fervently agreed.



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Just then the latch of the outer door clicked, and a cold blast streamed into the bedroom. Jumping up, the mother cried:

"Run, John! He's going!"

"Here, young fellow!" shouted the settler.

Batiste paused in the doorway, his hand on the latch, his slight body silhouetted against the white of the storm.

"Where you going, boy?"

"To Iz-le-roy," he answered. "Him sick. Deyhou!"

Sterling strode forward and caught him by the shoulder. "No, you don't," he said—"not that way." Then, turning, he called into the bedroom: "Here, mother! Get out all your wraps while I hitch the ponies. And fix up our best bed for a sick man."

A SAGA OF 54°



## A SAGA OF 54°

### I

**B**EYOND the parallel of 54°, a hundred miles north of Cumberland House—named after his Grace, the “Butcher”—and two hundred miles from Pelly, lies the country of the Makwas. If you should wish to go there, a team of shaganappy ponies, if they be tough, will run you up from Pelly in five days. The High Commissioner of the Hudson Bay makes it in three, but his horses are then turned out for a year’s rest. You cannot afford this. Between this country and the Lake of Amisk lie the pot-hole lands. Here, say the Makwas, the Great Spirit rested from his labors, and, blind to the chaos at his feet, looked forth on his work and called it good. But on arising to go thence, says the legend, he saw the evil of the land, and, because it had made him to say the thing which was not, he cursed it forevermore. And so, seamed, rugged, broken, bordered by forests of gloomy spruce, crude, just as it dropped from his hand, it endures to this day.

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Over its scarred surface writhe fathomless earth-cracks. Bleak sand-hills lie cheek by jowl with black morasses; and huge pits—the pot-holes of the Makwas—gape amid shaking quagmires and treacherous muskegs. A thousand lakes dot the bush. From their waters petrified trees thrust skeleton limbs. Over the inky depths the loon races his shadow, the hawk shrieks a malediction from the sky, and at night the owl bells anathema in the sleeping woods. Accursed, devil-haunted, peopled by wild beasts, it is avoided of Cree and Sioux and Makwa, and even the trappers of Fort à la Corne give it a wide berth.

The last rays of a blood-red sun flamed over the pot-hole lands, crimsoning the waters and clothing the abomination of desolation with scarlet robes and gold. From the eastern face of a deep pit the rose light glanced on the upturned countenance of a man. He stood at the bottom. All around the rock sloped up and out, so that a stone dropped from the top would have landed ten feet from the base. He was trapped; a cat could not have scaled that overhanging surface.

At the foot of the cliff the wearing hand of time had deposited a loose bank of sand and rubble. On this the man stood, the slack of a lariat coiled in his

## A SAGA OF 54°

left hand, his eyes fixed on a storm-riven stump that leaned over the cliff. Slowly at first, but with gradually increasing speed, he swung the noose until it whirled in whistling circles. Suddenly he jerked it up and out. Like a darting cobra it rose, whipping out the coils, hovered for an instant, straight and rigid, then curved easily over the stump.

"Bien!" the man exclaimed, throwing up his arms. He had forgotten his precarious footing. Overbalancing, he rolled, the centre of a small landslide, to the bottom of the heap. He sat up, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and gazed at the swinging rope.

"Peste!" he muttered. "Two days in this pit of hell. *Mère de Dieu!* Two days!"

Scrambling up the heap, he began to climb, gripping the rope with knees and feet. Three yards from the top he stopped dead. A grim face looked down from above. The climber's wrists felt as big as buckets, his arms were pulling from the sockets, but, staring defiantly upward, he hung on, swinging in mid-air. A minute passed. Then a big hand slipped by the face and shook the rope. The man dropped, and the next moment the lariat fell from above, coiling across his body.

Stunned and badly shaken, he lay on the sand while the sun slipped into his dusky blanket and

## THE PROBATIONER

the twilight faded. Up rose the noises of the night. Frogs croaked in the sloughs, a fox barked among the sand-hills, a wolf howled in the bush. A bronze moon peeped at him over the tree-tops, then climbed her silver path.

The man stirred, sat up, and glanced above. The stump stood, solitary, clearly outlined against the moonlit sky. Noiselessly mounting the heap, he tried another cast. It missed. He tried again, and again, and again, and still again, and many more times, until, towards midnight, the tightening rope sent a welcome thrill along his arm. He leaned forward, listening. The soughing night-wind, the myriad-tongued mosquito, the babel of frogs, these were all he heard.

"So!" he breathed. "The weasel sleeps."

He seized the rope, knife between teeth, ready to climb, but, as he reached up, it flew through his hand, rose, and fell about him. Sitting down, he coiled the lariat, then lay over and dozed. Once more, in the gray morning, he lassoed the stump; and this time his head levelled the bank before the silent watcher snapped him from the rope. He fell, turning head over heels, and lay until the rising sun flushed the east with trembling rose and gold.

## A SAGA OF 54°

When the sun arched to the meridian he crawled into the shade of the overhanging bank. It was hot. The pot-hole glowed like a devil's oven. Waves of heat rolled down from the high cliff, the sand-bank glared, the stones scorched his feet. Towards noon he stripped. Then lively sand-lizards ran over him, and buzzing flies nipped pieces from his body. Hot, hungry, and tired, he tried to forget his misery in sleep, but choking thirst kept him wide-awake until the sun ran down the western grade. Then he dozed.

The clip of a cutting axe brought him flying into the open. There, against the fiery sunset glow, stood a man, chopping away the stump.

"Devil!"

The man looked down. "What is it, M'sieu The-Factor-That-Is-To-Be?" he sneered. "It is warm down there, eh? I see m'sieu affects negligée since he inhabited the lower regions."

"It is warm, yes." The prisoner's hand was fumbling behind his back. "But, see you, Gène Lascurrettes, it is not so hot as—hell!" The knife flashed from his finger-tips straight at the chopper's back, who just then stepped sidewise to reach farther round the tree. It whizzed between arm and body, and stuck quivering in the stump.



## THE PROBATIONER

"So!" exclaimed Lascurrettes, swinging slowly round. "The little knife! My own, too, I had forgotten. Careless! An' this was a good throw of the knife. Forty feet if an inch! Excellent! But see you"—he pulled the knife and threw it on the ground—"now is your last bolt spent. An' M'sieu The-Factor-That-Is-To-Be will soon have opportunity of comparing this"—he waved his hand airily—"with hell." The prisoner made no reply. He sat on the sand-heap quietly playing with the coils of his lariat. "But m'sieu tires of the play," continued Lascurrettes. "Then, see you, we will finish." He thrust against the stump. "Not yet, eh? More chopping? Behold the white chips showering like the white blossom on the grave of M'sieu The-Factor-That-Is-To-Be. A pretty fancy."

## II

WHEN Gène Lascurrettes gave out his intention of building on the pot-hole lands, Fort à la Corne shrugged its shoulders and commented according to its kind.

"The man's daft!" growled the Scotch Factor.

"He is one fool, this Gène!" chorussed the French

## A SAGA OF 54°

half-breeds. They liked not the prospect of having Gène's wife, the prettiest woman in À la Corne, removed from the sphere of their observation.

The Cree runners expressed their surprise in harsh gutturals eked out by wealth of signs. Few men cared to trap in the "scab lands"; that any should wish to live there was beyond the compass of the Cree imagination. But, indifferent to criticism, Gène continued his preparation.

He was something of a mystery to Fort à la Corne, and mysteries it hated. Experience had taught it that those things which cannot be comprehended are to be feared. Therefore, being incomprehensible, Gène was disliked.

The coldest day of the preceding winter, when the spirit registered sixty and odd below and you could hear the groan of a sled ten miles, a team of lathered ponies had swept through the Fort gate. Poking its nose carefully out-of-doors, À la Corne had watched a sawed-off giant carry a half-frozen woman into the Factor's house. And such a woman! When the frozen veil was thawed from off her face, the Fort forgot its manners (inherited from the best blood of France) and stared; and not until she quietly turned her back did they remember. It was Gène and his wife. When they inquired of

## THE PROBATIONER

his journey he was extremely reticent, answering in general terms.

"He had come from the north?"

"He had."

"Far?"

"Far."

"Then, it was somewhat strange that a man should travel in the heavy frost?"

"Was it?"

"See you, sir, the ponies. They are the brothers of the little team of Pete Despard?"

"Likely."

Long after, they heard that he had traded dogs for ponies at Norquay's road-house, on the Great Slave Trail.

By a curious stroke of fortune, there landed in À la Corne, the next day, the Commissioner of Garry. He was on a quest for ponies, having just killed a team. He came face to face with Gène in the stable.

No one else was around.

"Ph-ew!" whistled the Commissioner. "I thought you were beyond the Arctic Circle."

"I am at À la Corne, m'sieu."

"So I see. And your wife?"

"She also."

## A SAGA OF 54°

The Commissioner thought awhile.

"You wish to stay?"

"Why not? A man must eat."

"How much for the ponies?"

"Two hundred."

"I take 'em. Now go and tell the Factor to put your name on the books. But say!" Gène stopped. "There's a man looking for you beyond the Great Bear Lake."

"He will not find me there, m'sieu."

The Commissioner watched him crossing the yard. "If that man gets down to À la Corne," he muttered, shaking his head, "there'll be a pretty fight. I'd like to see it"—he licked his lips in sinful anticipation—"but there'd be some dead men round. And dead men," he sighed, "are no use to the Company. Well, we'll get something out of him while he's here." The Commissioner had the knack of getting things out of men, and, if there was nothing to be got, he packed them off to some place where killing was easy.

When Gène's name was spread on the book, the Factor wondered, the Crees grunted astonishment, and the breeds lost their eyebrows in the roots of their hair. Then they remembered his wife, and grinned. Surely the Commissioner had been look-

## THE PROBATIONER

ing at himself in those dark eyes, which were as deep, black pools edged with willow. But presently they had other cause for wonder. Gène drove a nail with a rifle-shot at fifty yards, he tossed the caber farther than the Factor, broke the back of a Sioux wrestler, and his tongue cut like a two-edged sword. There was at first great talk of his wife.

"She's seen sorrow," said the Factor's wife. "An' I'm doobtin' if she gaes much on her man."

"La Petite!" exclaimed France Dubois. "Alas! To be married to one bear." Being young and hot in the blood, France would willingly have consoled the mismated woman. For a while he followed hard on her trail. Then, hearing of the matter, Gène pitched him over the Fort wall into a snowbank and left him there to cool. Which he did quickly, and returned to his forest loves.

Though very much in the minority, the women made most noise at the news of the moving. The breeds' wives cluttered together like a flock of angry mallards, but it fell to the Factor's woman to voice the general discontent.

"It's carryin' ye till that beast hole 'e'll be, is it?" she exclaimed, kissing Lois. "We'll see about it."

First she tackled the Factor, getting no satisfaction; then she cornered Gène in the store. "What 'll

## A SAGA OF 54°

be the meanin' o' this?" she demanded. "D' ye think to tak' the puir lassie, an' her wi' a weak heart, till yon desert place amang birds an' beasts an' deils an' Injuns? Tak' shame till ye!"

She paused, winded. Gène's black eye wandered over the stout figure. "Madame," he said, bowing, "is please to be interest in, the matter? Yes? Well, if she will know, it is good to trap on the bad lands. Game is plenty. Indians? Bah! They will not go within goose-flight of the pot-holes. Madame know this. The devils, is it? Yes," he mused, "we will take with us the big crucifix, an' Father Francis shall bless the cabin. Then again"—his brows shot up, and a wicked smile twinkled in his eye—"in Quebec, the Lascurrettes were of importance. Yes! An' the associations of À la Corne are scarcely—but I see madame understand. She, perhaps, has visit a good family." Slipping by, he left the woman paralyzed with indignation.

"Weel!" she gasped. "Did—you—ever? Siccan an impudence! An' me once housemaid to a real laird!"

In early springtime, Gène raised a cabin of spruce logs on the bank of a small creek hard by a big pot-hole. It was an honest day's ride from the Fort, which fact he took peculiar pleasure in drawing to

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the attention of the Factor's wife. And when the ground thawed enough to permit the cutting of roof-sod, he loaded his gear on a huge-wheeled Red River cart, and creaked over the prairie and through the bush to his own place. For a month or so he and Lois labored at the house, chinking and plastering, cutting roof-poles and sod to cover them; there was also a fireplace to build and a door to make. But this done and the last shovelful of mud plastered smoothly on the walls, time began to drag heavily on Lois's hands. Gène was away all day, tending his traps or hunting among the pot-holes; so, sitting by the cabin door, hands folded, eyes dreamily fixed on the distant bush, she thought and thought and thought; and through her mind slipped fleeting shadows.

Harking back to her childhood, she saw dimly the face of her mother, faintly beautiful, framed in the cloudy past. Then uprose the log mission of St. Ignace, its silvery chime, the gentle sisters, and the things they had taught her. When she was grown into a tall girl, some things she learned of herself: chief among them, that in the hands of a maid a man is as wax, though hard as steel to the wedded woman.

She dwelt tenderly on the glory of her first love,

## A SAGA OF 54°

when the sun shone brighter and the birds sang sweeter than before. But with this was linked the memory of the black day when, by order of the Company, he mounted and rode away to Fort McCloud against the Rockies. Shortly after, she followed her father the length of the Great Slave Trail to Fort Confidence, beyond the Arctic Circle. There she met Gène Lascurrettes. That was a bitter winter. The sun abdicated and withdrew to the Southland, leaving the North to the cold stars and Aurora Borealis. And the Forest King blew on her with his icy breath, and the elements seemed to conspire to chill the warmth at her heart, and the young men of Fort Confidence wondered at her coldness. The next summer came news of his death, and Lois's sun went out. He was killed, in the Rockies, by a grizzly, so said Lascurrettes, who himself had the news from a trapper of Fort York, who got it in Garry. Last of all, she thought of the mortal sickness of old Pierre Mondot—how he besought her to marry Gène, who stood well to become a factor of the Company, and so let him die in peace.

"Thou art beautiful, child, an' need a strong husband!" Those were his words. Then he told of the ruthlessness of men when handsome women



## THE PROBATIONER

were in question, until, half frightened, and to please him, she yielded. Happy? No! She had not been happy. She had done her duty in a mechanical sort of way, but there was no love on her side. And now indifference was turning to dislike. Had he not torn her from her friends at Confidence, and hurried her through frost and snow and ice and shrieking blizzard, the length of the Great North Trail? Made her a stranger in a strange land? And, on top of all, isolated her in this barren spot? Here was small cause of love.

She sat thus one afternoon in the late spring. It was the time of flowers. Harlot-like, the potato lands had clothed their barrenness with robes of spangled green. In the thick grass, brazen tiger-lilies flaunted before humble ox-eye daisies, yellow buttercups shouldered Scotch bluebells, and trembling golden-rod bowed over seas of dandelion. Through the floral ocean nimble gophers chased their loves. A dozen prairie-cocks strutted on a knoll before the hens, a quacking mallard steered her brood over a prairie slough, while high overhead a pair of sand-hill cranes circled up in the eye of the sun.

Gène was among the sand-hills trying for a shot at a sneaking wolverine: yet, far down the Fort trail,

## A SAGA OF 54°

the girl spied a black spot moving over the prairie. It grew larger and larger, presently resolving into the figure of a mounted man.

Suddenly she sprang up, hands to brow, eyes strained. "Mère de Dieu!" she whispered. She sank back, white and trembling, one hand pressed against her heart. The man hobbled his pony and stood before her. He was tall, heavy-jawed, aquiline of feature, and massively handsome; a strong man, earnest in good or evil.

"I will wait for thee, Jehan le Balt," he began, surveying her with questioning eyes, "'until the everlasting prairies shrivel in the fire of the last day.' These were the words of Lois Mondot. These were the words I told to my starved heart over there"—he waved to the west—"at Fort McCloud against the Rockies. Now am I a factor of the Company an' return for my bride, to find—"

Every speck of color had vanished from her face. Her mouth stood open, entreating breath; she swayed, recovered, then fell forward. He caught her, and pulled a flask from his pocket.

"Drink!" he commanded.

"It—it—is over!" she gasped.

"Drink!" He spoke with authority. The spirit sent the blood flushing to her cheek. "You are

## THE PROBATIONER

better?" She nodded. "An' when I come to Garry," he continued, doggedly, "I find—"

"Stop, Jehan!" She held up a staying hand. "You know I love—loved you. But they tell me, my father an' Gène, that you are dead—killed by a bear. *Mère de Dieu!*" she wailed. "How wretched I am! I do not care. 'Marry,' say my father, an'—an'—I did." She hung her head.

"For this he—"

"Ah, no, Jehan!" she anticipated. "For then would there be blood between us. It must not be. No, Jehan, no!"

"Then you will—" He drew her close, whispering. She shook her head, repeating again and again a faint "No, Jehan"; but, indifferent to yea or nay, he talked on, rapidly, authoritatively, laying his plan. The strong will prevailed. Soon she ceased, and nestled in, warm flushes chasing one another over her face and neck.

"To-morrow," she answered to a question, "he goes to the Fort, an' will not be back till midnight. But oh, Jehan, Father Francis?"

"Bah! little one! The fat priest, is it? The good father know that love is greater than law, an' he has a fine eye for a pretty maid. See you, there will be absolution when we are old and gray!"

## A SAGA OF 54°

She smiled, and nestled closer. The afternoon slipped by and the flickering shadows moved round a quarter-circle while they were still in talk. Suddenly the girl sprang from his arms; a passing cloud had obscured the sun, bringing on the evening twilight.

"Go, dear!" she exclaimed. "It is near sundown! He will soon be here!"

"Then," he said, kissing her on the mouth, "tomorrow, little one! Before moonrise. It is a long trail, the Fort McCloud, but love lies by the way an' happiness at the end."

She followed him among the pot-holes with her eyes and down the trail to the distant bush, and while she was still gazing, Gène turned the corner. He leaned his rifle against the wall.

"This devil-beast," he growled, throwing down the wolverine, "will no more rob the traps. An' this was a fine shot. By the Christ! Yes. Two hund— What is that?" His eye had caught the moving speck.

"I know not," she faltered. "This half-hour have I watched it, wishing for thy coming. Just now I had another stroke of the heart. One more such an' I am done."

"Hush!" He laid a caressing hand on her shoulder.

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"What foolish talk is this? No Cree would venture among the pot-holes. Afraid? Of a stray pony? See you, I will mount an' bring it to thee, an' we shall have the great laugh."

"No! No!" she exclaimed, shrinking from his hand. "Do not leave me. An' you are hungry? It was wrong of me to be afraid an' neglect the meal."

After he had eaten she moved outdoors. He lay on their bed, smoking and telling, between puffs, of a silver fox he had tracked in the sand-hills. Fifty dollars was its hide worth at À la Corne! Of this she should have ten, to buy her a dress fit for a queen. She should have brave gear, yes, as became a pretty woman, wife to a good hunter. Thus he rambled on. She answered in monosyllables. Twice he called her to come to bed, but not until he slept did she enter the cabin.

She was up betimes, and fried the breakfast bannock while Gène hitched his pony to the cart. After he was gone she hearkened to the huge wheels creaking over the prairie and drew a long, full breath. Just as he turned into the bush the night-wind sank to rest, the air chilled, and the sky blacks paled to dullest drab. Trembling flushes of red and yellow shot through the grays of dawn.

## A SAGA OF 54°

Easily the drabs faded into the blue of the zenith, the yellows deepened and blushed into rosy reds, while fleecy clouds drew dusky lines across the eastern sky. As the sun raised a golden rim, a robin perched on the roof-tree and piped his melodious note. Blackbirds in a near-by bluff broke into liquid music, a snipe chirped a cheerful pee-wee from a slough, and a pair of jays quarrelled in the joy of the morning. The hush, the glow, the throaty music of the birds, the infinite peace and freshness of the new-born day, filled her starved soul. Kneeling, like some fire-worshipper of old, she watched the great red sun lift and roll up his burnished plane.

All day she burned with a fever of impatience. Time and again, though she knew he would not come till night, her gaze travelled down the trail to the distant bush. Once, on turning from the door, her eyes fell on the crucifix against the wall. She shrank back. The Church had no blessing for an enterprise like hers; and, beneath Christ's cross, Gène had nailed a colored mission print of the "broad and easy way" leading down to Tophet. Towards evening the excitement brought on another palpitation of the heart, which left her, blanched and trembling, on the bed. At last the unwel-

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come sun dropped below the horizon. Rising, she lit an oil fire, and by its light got ready for the trail. She had but little gear. Her few things were soon rolled into a small bundle; then, throwing a shawl about her, she sat shivering with expectation. With dusk came the thud of a horse's hoofs. A hasty foot stumbled on the threshold.

"Jehan!"

She threw wide the door, and the yellow flare shone full on her husband's face. With a choking cry she fell at his feet. He stepped within. He had heard the name; her bundle lay on the floor.

"So, so," he whispered, gently, "it was to be the rider of the stray pony, was it?" The tone was quiet, but the veins on his forehead ridged black, the skin drew tight over his heavy jaw, and his hand played with his knife. "Rise!" he roared, with sudden passion. "Rise an' speak!" He struck his heel heavily into her side. "The stray pony!" he laughed. "That was not to be caught! The heavy pony! Whose hoofs bit deep in the soft places!"

She lay still. A minute passed. She had not yet moved. Stooping, he turned up her face. It was marble-white. Falling on his knees, he tore her dress from the neck and laid his rough head to the white breast.

## A SAGA OF 54°

Night fell as Jehan le Balt spurred from the bush. He was late. A led horse had persistently taken the wrong side of many trees, wherefore Jehan swore softly but with eloquence and variety.

"O son of the devil!" he muttered, "may you burn in one thousand hells! This is your fault. Black night an' a new trail." Dismounting, he followed the faint white line of dead grass around yawning pits and between bottomless earth-cracks, while his anxious eye scanned a distant light. Half an hour's fast walking brought him to the big pot-hole, and here he tied the horses at a poplar bluff.

The oil flare cast a broad stream of light through the cabin door, punching a yellow hole in the blackness. "Ho, petite!" he called. "Here am I!" The steep sides of the pot-holes threw back a hollow echo. All was strangely silent. A sudden fear chilled him. High overhead, with rush of beating wings, a shape swept by.

He started. "Bah!" he exclaimed. "Jehan le Balt, you are become as one chicken. Ma foi! To jump at a passing goose!"

Standing on the threshold, he laughed softly. "La pauvre," he whispered. "So? She is tired, an' sleeps. Good! She will travel the better."

She lay on the rude bed, the torn dress revealing



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the ivory bust gleaming round and full in the yellow flare. Love and passion surged with the hot blood through his veins. Quietly tiptoeing, he stooped and kissed her full on the mouth. Instantly he straightened. Her lips were icy cold.

"M'sieu salutes his love!"

Jehan whirled about. In the doorway, broad body touching either post, stood Lascurrettes. He was smiling; his hand played gently with his knife.

"You—did—this—thing?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "It was not my fortune, m'sieu. The good God avenges the outraged husband. So say the holy fathers. She died of a stroke of the heart."

"Of a broken heart!"

"As you please. What matter? She is dead. An' you, M'sieu The-Factor-That-Is-To-Be, pay for her death. But not now. Presently. There is work to do."

Taking axe and shovel, Gène led the way to the bluff where the horses were tied. The moon had just peeked over the trees; the black darkness had withdrawn to the pits.

"Here is a good place." Lascurrettes buried the axe in the sod. "Soon there will be more light."

They worked by spells, preserving the silence of

good haters, one picking and the other shovelling. After an hour's digging, Gène looked down on the grave. "It will do," he said.

At the door Jehan le Balt drew to one side. "M'sieu will wish to make his adieus?"

He waited patiently. No need for hurry, though the northern moon silvered plain and forest, and he could see the faint white trail winding over a mile of prairie. Yet, time and again he caught himself thinking of Lois as waiting, waiting, waiting; waiting to start on the long journey which ended at Fort McCloud.

"It is her spirit," he whispered.

"M'sieu?" Lascurrettes stood by the open door. He entered, closed the door, and knelt by the dead. Raising the small hand, he placed it on his head. Softly, like a caress, it settled among his curls, quieting, with cool touch, the pain at his heart. He arose soothed and calm, and called the husband.

"M'sieu," he said, "this was good, an' I would repay in kind. As I hope to presently kill you, I swear she was innocent of wrong. Her heart was always mine. This you knew when you lied away her body."

Lascurrettes's lips drew into a wicked snarl. "Innocent!" he growled. "This is the talk of a

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boy. Does the hand hold from the ripe fruit when the belly says pluck? This will not save you."

In her blankets they buried Lois, shovelling by turns until the grave was filled and mounded. When the last sod was turned, they stood for a space with bowed heads; then, retiring a few yards, they faced together.

Between the grave and the pot-hole stretched a level sward. Over this they began to circle, backward, forward, sidewise, tricking for an opening, knives scintillating sparks of blue moonlight.

Suddenly Jehan let drive a circular cut from face to waist. It fell short. The return flashed straight at his breast, and Lascurrettes drove in thrust upon thrust, bearing him back towards the pot-hole. A quick side-leap reversed the position, and Jehan slashed at the side, and missed. Steel sawed steel. The knives flashed in and out for a breathless minute, weaving a fiery pattern; then, bleeding, they drew apart and circled.

The next rush brought them together, free hand to knife hand, and Jehan felt the power of his foe. Slowly he was forced back to the pit. He felt the knife hand tearing from his grip, while the grasp tightened on his wrist. He must do something, and do it quick.

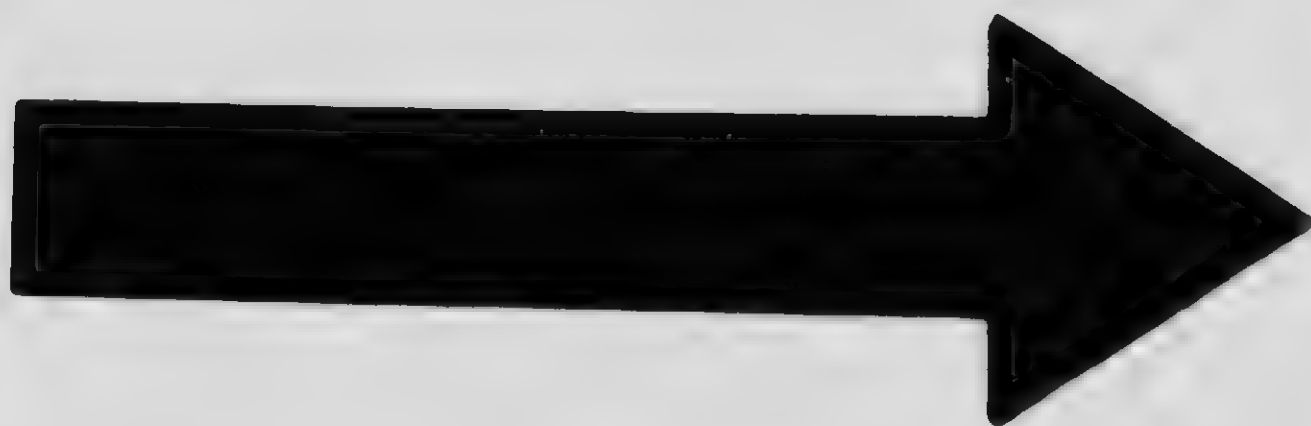
## A SAGA OF 54°

"Courage!" the voice of Lascurrettes sounded in his ear; "it will soon be over, an' m'sieu in hell."

Raising his knee, Jehan jammed it with desperate energy into the other's stomach, at the same time throwing back. The grapple broke. He fell, head and shoulders over the pit. For one moment he hung in the balance, then Lascurrettes's knife flashed straight at his face. He saw it coming, dodged, overbalanced, clutched at the grass, and toppled back.

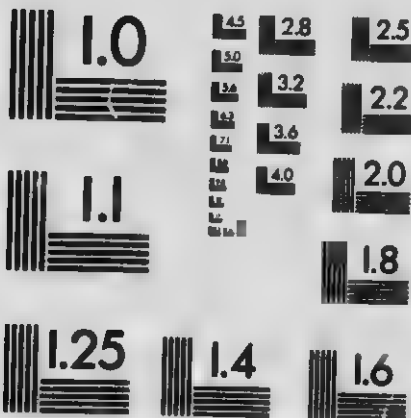
Lascurrettes crawled to the edge and looked down. He could see nothing, but presently a groaning curse ascended to him through the blackness. Jehan had fallen in the loose sand. Quietly withdrawing, he walked to the grave and lay down to chew the bitter cud of sorrow and thwarted purpose.

He was the child of iron forces and rigorous conditions; the last link of a chain every length of which was hot-forged by nature and chosen from a thousand. Strong, obstinate, acute, he had shouldered through life, bending man and woman to his will. But his wife's weakness had proved her strength. She was gone beyond recall. To be robbed of his love!—even by death? Springing up, he shook a threatening fist skyward, and cursed the power



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## THE PROBATIONER

which had levelled him in the dust. He waited, almost expectant. The stars looked coldly down, the moon shed her pale light as before, the murmuring night-wind plucked a dead leaf and cast it in his hot face. The mote in the sunbeam had defied the infinite and received its answer.

Smarting under a vague sense of futility and failure, he turned his gaze to the black pot-hole. "Peste!" he muttered, "this is fool work, this challenging the stars, but over there"—he shook his big fist—"is one that shall pay."

For two days he kept secret watch and ward, awaiting the torment of thirst and hunger. But on the second day he observed the prisoner cutting his mooseskin coat into strips, and saw him twist them into a long lasso. When it was ready for the cast, he crawled to the stump and waited. For a night and day he feasted fat, then, gluttoned, turned to destroy the last hope of the doomed man.

"See you," he called below, "how great is my solicitude. Presently the tree will fall, an' I would not spoil a factor of the Company. Stand from under!" The stump cracked. "Now," he laughed, raising for the last blow, "to hell with you, Jehan le Balt!"

## A SAGA OF 54°

Unseen, noiseless, the lasso shot up from below, hovered, curved over, and fell around his shoulders. He grasped the tottering tree. It cracked smartly, toppled over, and man and stump crashed into the yawning pit.





THE BLACK FACTOR



## THE BLACK FACTOR

**W**HEN you have snatched your canoe from the grip of Assiniboine, labored across the Prairie Portage, paddled a long week on Manitoba, and sweated over the divide to Winnieagoos, you shall, if your muscle be good for another week's paddling, come to the Big Portage of Cedar Lake.

Two days thereafter, sore, stiff, and with the appetite of a starved grizzly, you arrive—that is, if your inner works are copper lined and proof from alkali—at Devil's Drum, a little corner of the frozen North which has sent many a peltry to swell the store of the Great Company. Then, when your camp-fire flickers in the woods and the night-owl solemnly bells the frogs to vespers, a trapper will probably lounge over from the fort to sample your tobacco and hear the news.

If the tobacco be good, the spirit may move him to speak of the building of Devil's Drum and of the notable circumstances attendant thereon, but unless

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you have whiskey you will not hear the story of the Black Factor, nor will you be allowed a peep into the great book of the Company wherein it is written.

I had. Thus it was that I came to read the story which Père du Fré wrote in the log of Devil's Drum—the great book which lies on the top shelf of the old log store, and which none but a commissioner may open. And just as I read, it is here set down, save that I thought it better to omit some moralizings upon the duty of man with which the father interspersed his narrative.

"The spring that Fraser came in from the west," he begins, "we of Garry were in straits. Not content with infringing on our charter, the Nor'west Company had set itself to ruin our trade; to which devilish end they had burned a Company's post and killed its factor. Their half-breeds, too, under the command of one De Knyff, harried our packers upon the trails and carried off their furs. And while it is true we repaid these violations of the laws of God and man in kind, yet the season's pack was light and his Excellency the Governor both sour and sulky. His state of mind may be imagined when I say that for three months he went unconfessed

"'Furs we must have, father,' he said. when I called one morning intent on reproving him for his

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lack of duty. 'Furs we must have, if I go unconfessed to the day of judgment!'

"'Son!' I protested. But he heard me not, and fell to biting his nails and pulled his beard ragged, while his brow drew in heavy lines.

"'Yes,' he continued, talking to himself; 'we must carry the war into their country—build a post north of the Big Lakes, and hold it, if we have to install the devil as factor and sink the Nor'westers in the bottom hole of hell!'

"'Hard words, but the man was sore beset. 'Oh, where shall I get a man?' he cried, dropping his head, and as though in answer a half-breed runner arrived with news that Fraser was in the fort.

"'The very man!' exclaimed the Governor. 'Send him here.'

"While waiting, his Excellency leaned head on hand, his eyes fixed upon his papers. I studied him. And once, looking quickly up, he caught my glance and read the thought therein, for he answered at once:

"'Yes, he will get himself killed, but what would you, father? It is the way of the Company. We must have furs.'

"'Men,' I answered, 'are of more importance in the sight of God than furs.'

## THE PROBATIONER

“‘In the sight of God, yes,’ he rejoined, smiling; ‘but in the eyes of the Company, no, father.’ And before I could rebuke him Fraser strode through the open door.

“At this time he must have been full two-and-thirty, though the man was a mystery and none knew aught of his parentage. He came into the Company’s service from the west, bringing with him some score of silent Sioux, whose discreet tongues revealed nothing of his antecedents. All questions they answered with a wag of the head. But this much we guessed: his name betokened a Scots father, and none but a French mother could have lit the fire in his eyes. Of his appearance, it needs only to know that he stooped to enter the door, while his shoulders brushed on either jamb. Tall, strong, swart—swart as his own Sioux, and, if report spoke truly, twice as crafty—I see him now even as he stood that day before the Governor.

“‘Fraser,’ his Excellency began, ‘we’re in a mess. We’ve got to do something, d’ ye hear?—something big—and you’re the man to do it. I was thinking of tapping the country north of Winnipegos. It’s risky—’ Here a raise of the Factor’s black brows brought him to a pause. ‘All right,’ he continued, smiling. ‘We’ll leave the risk and come to business.

## THE BLACK FACTOR

If you build a fort on the Moose River, I'll—I'll make you Commissioner of Rupert's Land.'

"On the third day following this conversation—I mind it well, for that morning I celebrated the Easter mass—two ten-men canoes rounded the bend into the Assiniboine, after which, for weary months, we lacked news of Fraser. And just about the time I had given him up, there came, early one morning, a thundering rap upon my door. Without stood the Governor, in most excellent mood.

"'Good-day, father,' he greeted. 'This is an unseasonable call, but I bear good news. To-day I take boat for a voyage of inspection to our new fort of Devil's Drum, and, if you care to come along, I doubt not Black Jack will give you welcome. It is long since he shrived him, and the tale must be both long and bloody.'

"As it becomes a priest to be ever zealous for the cure of souls, I accepted the invitation, though not relishing it overmuch. Had I known—well, it has been wisely ordained that we see not the perils that beset our path. Yet we fared well enough on the journey, and came, after two weeks' toilsome travelling, in by night to Devil's Drum.

"'Hey!' chuckled the Governor, when at moon-rise we thudded at the water-gate. 'Black Jack



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seems well in train for the commissionership, eh, father? Was there ever a finer bit of building?"

"Like some lithe beast, the fort crouched in the crotch of Moose River and Cedar Lake. Across the landward side ran a log stockade, with ditch and counterscarp, while on the double water-front a palisade jutted into lake and river. These, drawing to a point, gave the couchant beast a tail, and provided a water-yard wherein a score of canoes could safely ride. For a quarter-mile beyond the barrier, too, the timber was cut and burned, and within the enclosure Black Jack had built stores, fur-houses, and quarters for his men. With such confidence did the fort inspire me that I made a vow right then that the Governor should lack the company of a certain churchman on his backward trip.

"'Can't make out how you did it, Fraser!' the Governor exclaimed, when, next morning, he completed his inspection. 'Surely the devil must have helped you?'

"'Sir,' I interposed, 'God was with Mr. Fraser!'

"With a twinkling eye he asked pardon for his levity, and added, somewhat irreverently, that he had forgotten the alliance betwixt the Company and the Almighty, and then turned to question

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Fraser. He was ever a quiet man and gave us little information, yet this much we learned:

"Silent as death's shadow, he had stolen through the land, and of those who crossed his trail none lived to tell. They died quickly and without noise. And long before wind or rain travelled to the Nor-westers in their fort of Devil's Point, his outer defences were strongly built. Nor were they finished one whit too soon. From Devil's Point a messenger sped north as far as fifty-ve, and raised Cree, Obijay, and Swampy River Sioux to drive him from the land. In the third week of his occupation, the smoke of many fires mingled with the reek of the burned clearing; at night the sky blushed red above their camp; the still night air pulsed to the throbbing war-drum.

"'Wherefore,' said Black Jack, 'we called this Devil's Drum.'

"'As you please, father,' said his Excellency, when I asked permission to remain and establish a mission. 'As you please. But 'ware that you heal not their souls until Fraser has broken their bodies. Seeing that you're not to be of us, we will, as we came in by night, go out by day.'

"Which he did. And while the Crees chased him down the lake, the Governor sat in the stern, potting

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them like so many rabbits. All morning we heard the crack of his rifle. From the tower by the gate I watched his canoe grow smaller and smaller, until it drew to a speck and vanished, carrying him with it from this story.

"For the bigger half of a month after the departure of the Governor death stalked in picturesque guise about our walls.

"I began to despair of my mission, and was beginning to regret not having journeyed with the Governor, when one of our scouts brought news of trouble in the Indian camp.

"When the man came in I was with the Factor in the big log store, as yet empty of goods; and after he had delivered him of his news Fraser said nothing, but sat thinking. Just as I was about to put a question—for the Sioux had spoken in his own tongue—he struck his knee, roaring with sudden laughter, and cried out:

"'Send Neepawa here!'

"'What is it?' I asked.

"'That remains to be seen,' he answered, drumming on his knee; and this was all the satisfaction I could get. But I knew some desperate game must be afoot, else had he not called for the chief of his Sioux.

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"He came—a tall man, brown, lean, lank, possessed of the strength of three, yet lithe as a lynx and twice as cruel. Taking him to one side, the Factor whispered in his ear, and while he talked the Sioux nodded to every word. What they said I could not hear, but, despite this lack of confidence, which reflected somewhat on my strength of wit—a wit which his Excellency the Governor has found useful on occasion—at the end of their conference I approached and said:

"'Son, I judge there is deadly work ahead. Let me exercise my office.'

"Whereat he laughed down from his great height and answered: 'At present, father, there is no need; but if that which I contemplate comes to a head, then shall I require your services.'

"That night I slept ill, and at break of day I turned out to cool my fever in the morning mist. And as I stepped from my quarters the watch hailed loudly. Through the gray of the clearing two spectral figures loomed, each bearing upon its shoulders a heavy burden.

"'What is it?' I inquired.

"But the sentry shook his head, cocked his musket, and hailed again. A swirl of mist swept

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in between, and from its centre the voice of the Factor answered.

"Where have you been?" I demanded, as he strode through the gate.

"Seeking a wife after the manner of the tribe of Benjamin!" he answered, with a laugh.

"Wherewith he set down his burden and unwound a blanket from the head of as fine a woman as ever filled the eye of man. Half-breed she was at the first glance, yet never have I seen girl more winning in a tender way. Though tall, her round, full shape moulded her dress in easy lines, her eyes were lit with the sweet languor which makes men's hearts as water, her loosened hair veiled her in night's black splendor. 'And this,' continued the Factor, pointing to Neepawa's burden, 'is Saas, daughter of Clear Sky, chief of the Swampy Sioux.'

"Then the plot came out. Saas had made trouble in the Indian camp. On the north side of her father's tepec, Estahagan, headman of the Obijay, had raised a pile of goods against her hand, while on the south Iz-le-roy, chief of the Crees, had stacked his store of wealth. Day by day the piles had grown—for Saas was a famous curer of skins—and just when the pile of Iz-le-roy was the greater

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by full three packs of beaver, our scout brought in the news.

"This it was that sent the Factor forth by night. In the willow thicket behind Clear Sky's tepee, he and the Sioux crouched, waiting until Saas should go and draw water from the woodland spring. And presently—just as the scout said—she came out with her skin buckets and paused, unconscious of their eager eyes. Within the camp a hundred fires glowed with a strong red light, leaping and dancing like fire blossoms in a wind, but it was yet dark by the spring, and Saas was afraid. She made to go back, and dashed the watchers' hope, then paused and filled them with joy. She talked with some one within the tepee, then out into the firelight came the half-breed girl.

"‘So,’ concluded the Factor, softly caressing the girl's hair, ‘these two came together to the spring.’ She shrank from his touch, but even this seemed rather to please him, for he added: ‘Modest? Well, so be it! It is a grace that will become the wife of the Commissioner of Rupert's Land—eh, father?’ And with that he placed her under my care and in the cabin next to mine until such time as he should finish the business of the Indians.

"Things fell out pretty much as the Factor

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thought they would. Within the hour Clear Sky himself strode into the clearing and stood, making the peace sign. He was an old man, gnarled and rugged, but when they brought him to Fraser he straightened with the swing of a young pine.

"‘Yes,’ said the Factor, when the old man had made oration; ‘we’ve got your daughter.’ And a wave of his hand brought her from a near-by hut.

"The old man’s eyes glistened — doubtless the piles before his tepee seemed a little nearer for her presence. But, as it chanced, all that morning the lean, brown chief of our Sioux had been making the best of his opportunity with Saas, and now she incontinently gave her father her back.

"‘But the warm blankets, O Saas!’ he gasped. ‘The warm blankets, the knives, and the great packs of winter beaver that stand before my tepee! What of these?’

"But as these were matters of another’s house-keeping, Saas remained unmoved. And here the Factor stepped in. He explained that we of the Company were peaceable men and friends of the Swampy Sioux. All that we asked was leave to barter peacefully for furs, for which we would pay the highest price. And whereas the Nor’westers of Devil’s Point gave but one fathom of tobacco for

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seven white winter beaver, we would give two. Of powder, the Sioux should receive two pounds for five beaver—good powder, measured with thumb without the brim. And that Clear Sky might lose nothing by the maiden, out of the Company's store he should receive tea, tobacco, and blankets that would double in value those of Estahagan. This ended the talk. Clear Sky returned to his people with instructions to make cause with the Crees against the Obijay, and then to join with us of Devil's Drum in driving out the Crees.

"And by the time the sun marked high noon we knew that he was carrying out the plan. From the watch-tower by the gate Fraser watched the ebb and flow of fight, and I, standing beneath, heard him growl:

"Go it, dogs! Eat one another, but save a meal for me.'

"That meal he got—a full one. Towards sundown, just before the Obijays fled across the river, he took up his position. And when the Crees returned they were caught betwixt him and the Swampy Sioux. Like cornered rats they fought. But so hard were they stricken that out of a hundred fighting men but twenty straggled back to Amisk, north of fifty-four.



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"'We must give them no rest, father!' said the Factor, when he returned at moonrise. So, leaving six men with me to keep the fort, he took two days' meat, and, while Clear Sky drove hard on the trail of the broken Obijay, he chased the Crees to the heart of the Pasquia Hills.

"After he was gone, I remembered the girl—that she had not yet eaten—and, taking a lantern and food, I entered her cabin. She rose on my entrance, and stood with heaving bosom, her eyes saucerfuls of fear—a fair, frightened picture framed in yellow light. She was pale, too, and tear-stained. And as I looked, I wondered—wondered that so fair a flower should spring and blossom in the dirt of an Indian camp.

"'Tears, my child?' I began, intending to cheer her. 'What folly! Surely you are better here, among people of your blood. Besides,' I added, with a touch of archness, 'the Factor is in love, and what better could a girl wish than to marry with a good, strong man?'

"While I was speaking her eyes grew dark as midnight pools. 'No, no!' she whispered, stretching a long, white arm towards me. 'No! Already I am a wife!'

"As the word left her lips, the fear in her eyes

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passed to mine, and I trembled—for her. As yet Fraser had proved singularly indifferent to the charms of womankind, but for this very reason I knew that, with his love once cast, he would burst every tie that held him from his desire. Could it be? Was the woman really bound? For a moment the doubt shook me; then, remembering whence she came, I chided myself and answered:

“‘Nonsense, daughter! Some passing fancy, mayhap. Some tie of the kind the Church knows naught of.’

“‘Ah, no,’ she protested, with a quick intake of the breath. ‘I am wife to Rafe de Knyff.’

“‘Rafe de Knyff!’ I echoed. ‘Then you are—’

“‘Virginie La France!’

“It hardly required her assertion to assure me of her truth, for Father Umfreville—a good man, though strangely blinded to the rights of our Company—had married them at Fort William. And now I remembered that when, according to our custom, he had forwarded a copy of the register, I had fancied he expatiated somewhat warmly on the beauty of the bride.

“‘And where is Rafe de Knyff?’ I queried.

“‘Gone to Devil’s Point, to report to Le Brun, the Factor,’ she answered. Then, folding her hands,

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she broke out in uncontrollable sorrow: 'To-morrow he will be back and find me gone! Oh, what *shall* I do? What *shall* I do?'

"For what followed I have been taken to task by many, some good men, some bad, but all agreed that it is right and proper to harry a Nor'wester, to drive him from the land, to reive him of his cattle, or to carry off his wife. Yet, looking backward, the wisdom of later years approves the course I took. Gently touching the child's hair, I said:

"'Courage, daughter! No harm shall come to you or him. I myself will meet him.'

"And this I did, finding him a tall fellow, nearly the height of Fraser, but lacking his bulk. His countenance was frank, yet grave. He carried the air of one used to command. A good man, too, I judged by his conversation, though holding most heterodox opinions anent our rights. Still, he came with me most amicably, and in the pitch of night I got him into the fort unseen.

"Next day we held a consultation. 'Will I join with your people?' he answered to my suggestion that herein lay the settlement of the difficulty. 'No! Nor will I ever acknowledge their authority to trade upon these lands!'

"Not one whit would he swerve from this, so but

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one thing remained—to let them escape. To this end, therefore, I secretly provisioned the smaller of our two canoes, and at dusk loosed the water-gate. Night fell thick as ink, and after the evening meal I stepped outside and found all quiet. A single ray shone from the men's quarters, stabbing the blackness like a sword of light. Over in the forest the night wind mourned; a breeze rippled the lake along the shore; I could hear the river hungrily licking its bank. Opening the door of my cabin, I called De Knyff and whispered:

"Go you to the water! I will bring your wife."

"Silent as a shadow he stole away, the while I held my breath, listening. Once I thought a stone rolled, but it was not from his foot, and the watchman by the gate gave no sound. After he was safely gone, I crept back to his wife. She was ready.

"Come, child," I said; "your husband waits."

"But her face paled with sudden horror, she gasped and staggered back, all trembling, her eyes staring past me. Whirling about, I came face to face with Fraser in the door.

"Ye-es?" he said, smiling in my eyes. "It was well that I pushed on." He spoke like one explaining matters to himself. "I thought to play a trick on the guard, but this—this goes beyond expecta-

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tion. And now, M'sieu le Père,' he growled, flushing blackly under his skin, 'where, oh, where is the happy husband?'

"He was angry, but his eyes wandered keenly, searchingly, from me to Virginie, and from her to me. Outwardly he was calm, cool, rigid, but it was the rigidity of the lava crust, beneath which surges the molten rock. And as I stood speechless, thinking what I should say, I came to know how quick is the wit of a loving woman. Like a flash she answered:

"'A day's sail down the lake, where even the Black Factor dare not seek him!'

"'So?' he queried, quietly enough, but in a tone that reddened her face and neck with the scarlet flush of shame. 'So?' For what seemed a long time his eyes drank of her glowing beauty, then he turned on me with an eloquent shrug.

"'It seems, father,' he said, 'that your services are not for us, and, let me remind you, this is the hour which good priests spend in prayer.'

"'My son!' I entreated. 'My son!'

"But he laughed once more in my face, an ugly laugh, and advanced towards me. Now, it has pleased the Almighty to make me a man small of body and meek of spirit, yet it comforts me to know

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that in this hour of trial I found courage to perform my office. Stepping forward, I placed hands on his giant chest and thrust him back. He staggered—not from my force, but from its suddenness. His eyes reflected the hues of hell. His knotty fist rose and hovered, then, quickly changing his intent, he lifted me like a fractious child and dropped me outside the door.

“As it banged to I could have wept, wept tears of fire, and in my fierce anger I forgot the husband—forgot him till the sound of a pleading voice brought me to. Then I ran and plumped into his arms, for he was coming to find what kept us.

“‘Go!’ I gasped, choking.

“There was no need for more. He stiffened, every muscle tense, and shot away. The door creaked, a panel of yellow light winked at the blackness—he was inside. I tiptoed, listening, and from the thick air my straining ears picked a dull vibration, a heavy, stifled thudding. It endured, perhaps, for the space of a score of breaths, for the little time it took for me to gain the door, and as I laid hand to the bobbin there came a heavy fall, and then—silence.

“I pulled and entered. The Nor’wester was on his knees. A heavy bruise crossed his forehead,

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one hand pressed his side, his breath came in painful gasps. And beside him stood Virginie La France, a hatchet in her hand. At her feet, vacant-eyed, but still heavily frowning, lay the Factor. Under his head a black patch widened, widened and crept out—out to join the drop that fell from her blade. Over all the sickly lantern cast its yellow flare.

“‘Father!’ she whispered. ‘Father!’

“Stooping, I laid my hand to Fraser’s breast. I felt no beat; and as I realized that this man of mighty parts was stricken in his sin, anger faded, and from its ashes welled a gush of pity. But there was much to do. Rising, I stepped out and peered around the corner. All was still. In the men’s quarters the light still shone, the sentry held his lonely watch. It seemed that the thick spruce logs had kept their secret, but, to make sure, I sauntered across the yard and saluted him as carelessly as I might.

“‘Bezhou!’ he answered.

“‘You hear anything?’ I asked.

“‘Cowene,’ he grunted.

“On my return, the Nor’wester would have it that I should go with them, holding that if the Sioux but dreamed I’d a hand in the killing of the Factor no torture would suffice them. But I refused, telling

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him that I would hold the post against the coming of his Excellency the Governor, and, though Virginie joined her prayers to his, I would not be persuaded. Yet as there was reason in the argument, I got their help to make disposal of the body. It would be an easy matter. Outside the river called, called with gentle but insistent voice; it would clasp him lovingly to its bosom and bear him out to the deep waters where a man may rest in peace. So between us we carried him to the brink, and as the icy flood licked him off our hands, De Knyff whispered:

"There goes a man both strong an' brave!"

"May God rest him!" I answered. While the murmuring river, the mournful wind, and the sighing forest softly breathed his requiem, the Black Factor passed onward to the lake.

"But time was passing and moonrise drawing on. Far down the lake a milky glow already touched the sullen waters. The dead was gone to his place, and there was need for hurry lest others follow. So, getting back to the cabin, we cleansed the floor of blood, and set things in such order that it would appear Virginie had escaped by the window. For an hour we thus labored, then, after a last glance round, I closed and barred the door. In the east the dark-



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blue sky was laced with silver, the moon just peeked above the forest.

"'Hurry!' whispered De Knyff, and with the word some one stumbled.

"'Softly!' I breathed.

"A loud laugh answered, and I paused, consumed with wonder at his folly. Again the laugh rang out, sharp, clear, like that of a mocking devil. The Nor'wester was close by my side; it was not he. We drew together, astonished, waiting in horrible expectancy. And of a sudden a blaze of powder flashed and set fire to the beacon of dried grass and reed which lay by the landing ready for occasion. Under its fiery glance the dark shore-waters blushed blood-red, a myriad yellow tongues danced in the ripple, and the palisade, canoes, and open water-gate stood as in the light of day. And there in the beacon's glare, surrounded by his Sioux, stood the Factor.

"From his hair and clothes water dripped. He was smiling, but the smile lacked mirth, and when he spoke it was in bitter irony. 'A well-considered plot,' he said, 'but lacking one thing—the villain yet survives.'

"Afterwards I found that when the woman struck, the axe glanced, inflicting a flesh wound,

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and then fell flat on the great nerve ganglion at the base of the brain. Thus, completely paralyzed, with respiration suspended and heart action enfeebled to the point of stopping, Fraser had lain until the icy flood shocked him back to life.

"‘So,’ he continued, ‘it was to be a merry trip across the lake while the Black Factor slept soundly to the music of the paddles?’

"We made no answer. The Nor’wester stood sullen and defiant, his arm about his wife; she leaned forward like one fascinated, silent, breathless, her red lips slightly parted. As for myself, I was sorely puzzled, for I saw something strange in Fraser’s face—a dawning resolve.

"‘You *would* journey down the lake?’ he persisted. ‘Then—you shall!’

"At a wave of his hand, the Sioux guard swept the Nor’wester from his feet and lifted him on high. Virginie screamed. She thought they were about to cast him in the lake, and so, for the moment, did I. But before I could open my mouth, Fraser pointed to the canoe and ordered sharply:

"‘Set him in!’ Then, turning to the wife, the Factor added, in tones that were strangely compounded of tenderness and anger: ‘You also! And now,’ he finished, when she was safely in, ‘go!’

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"Though astonished beyond measure, De Knyff spent no time in staring. At the word his paddle cut the water, and down the trail of fire, with ever-quickenning speed, the canoe sped to the water-gate. When it had covered half the distance, a change flashed in the Factor's face. His hand gripped the prow of the second canoe, and he stood, hesitant, as though minded to follow. I saw the knuckles of his great hand gleam white through the skin, a shiver shook his frame, and then—he raised a sudden foot and stove in the birch-bark bottom.

"The Nor'wester's back was on us, but Virginie saw the play. As the canoe floated through the water-gate, just before the darkness quenched the star-fire of her eyes, they rested—as I live, they rested on Fraser with an expression of regret. And he read their message.

"'By the mass!' he said, laying a kind hand upon my shoulder. 'It is well, father, we have not a third canoe.'"

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## AN ILIAD OF THE SNOWS



## AN ILIAD OF THE SNOWS

"YES, he was a hard man, an' stout—this Commissioner," continued Red Brischaux, with some irritation. "But what should a fat Easterling know of stout men?" He viciously poked our camp-fire, and sent the red sparks flying up to the black sky. He had just finished a yarn of old Commissioner M'Garry, and took this method of signifying his displeasure with my lack of reverence for the power that rules the North.

"He seems," I answered, soothingly, "to have been a great man, Brischaux." I should not have thus lightly passed over the reflection on my birth and girth had it not lacked four hours of midnight and a hundred thousand wolves been howling round our camp. A dozen, says Red Brischaux; but this one might expect from a man so utterly devoid of imagination. They made noise enough for a million. You see, we had just stricken a great kill. From

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the crotch of a black poplar swung the carcass of a moose, and the blood hung heavy on the air.

"Yes," I agreed, by way of provoking him to another story, "he was, as you say, a great man, and always carried his point."

"One man there was—" he began, hesitatingly.

"That defied him? No!" said I, warmly.

"Though in the end the Commissioner had his way," he went on. "Thus it was."

Snuggling in my blankets, I watched the sparks fly upward and smoked a pipe while Red Brischaux sang his Iliad of the Snows. Just as he gave it by the flickering camp-fire it is here set down; but as Red Brischaux is warm of blood—as evidenced by his remarks anent my girth—and loves strong language, I have thought better to translate in politer speech.

If Roche Brule, Factor of À la Corne, had wished to select the most exasperating season to hurl defiance at the Commissioner, he could not have chosen better. A February thaw had smashed the winter trails, Assiniboine had burst her icy bonds, and five hundred packs of fur that ought to have gone downstream with the flood waters were dumped on a hundred trails. The Commissioner, a dour man

## AN ILIAD OF THE SNOWS

at the best of times, was become as touchy as a wounded grizzly; and packers, clerks, and full-fledged factors of the Company stepped lightly round the great log store wherein he sat.

A month before, Donald Fraser had trailed to À la Corne to freight down the season's catch. With him he carried news of the approaching marriage of Jeanne Dumont, a ward of the Commissioner. Now, as the luck would have it, for many a long year Brule had kept this girl in mind. He had seen her blossom from a long slip of a girl into a strong and healthy woman. As the gardener watches the bloom gathering on his choicest peach, so he had pleased in her ripening; and now the fruit was ready, and an alien hand reached to pluck it. She was to marry Paul M'Garry, a beefy Scotchman, nephew to the Commissioner—a man he sore disliked.

Brule listened quietly to the Scotchman's tattle, answering nothing to his jocular comment; then, when he had all the news, he took his gun and got from the fort, to think it out alone. All that day they heard his rifle talking. Fox, rabbit, prairie-chicken, coyote—anything that ran on legs or flew with wings he shot, and left lying in the snow. He was in the mood that hurls the she-bear at the



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slayer of her young, but by sundown his passion calmed. He returned to the fort quiet and apparently resigned. But the following day he hurried south with a couple of his men; and a week after, in the thick of night, he snatched the girl from the Big Grass Post.

Now, Paul M'Garry was not lacking in physical courage, but Brule had got a good night's start, and he was an ill man to beard in his own den. Paul flew to the Commissioner with the tale of his wrongs. But when, ten days therefrom, a special courier rode into À la Corne and demanded the girl of his hands, Brule laughed in his face.

"My compliments to m'sieu the Commissioner," he said, stretching his great body to his full height, "an' tell him if he wants Jeanne Dumont to come and get her." Then he strode off across the yard, a towering figure, to make his visit to the prisoner.

She rose on his entrance. She had been crying, but at sight of him her eyes snapped. A bewilderingly small foot, daintily moccasined, impatiently tapped the ground, and the hot blood flushed her cheeks.

"Still inconsolable?" he queried, with a lift of the brows. "An' tears? This is foolish. But see,

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the suspense will soon be over. I have sent for a priest."

"Brute!" She flared up in sudden wrath, then, conscious of the smile in his eyes, dropped her own. It was very annoying. He was positively admiring her passion. "Oh," she groaned, in impatient anger, "wait till the Commissioner lays hands on you! He will hang you in the gates of À la Corne."

"Ye-es?" he queried, cheerfully. "But this will be long years after we marry, petite. None too big a price for so much bliss."

"I will never marry—you!"

"No?" The smile still hung about the corners of his mouth, but it seemed rather to add to the sudden sternness of his face. He stepped forward and bent to the level of her eyes. "Well," he said, slowly, "in this you—please yourself. But most women prefer—the—sacrament."

A quick challenge passed from eye to eye. A hasty answer trembled on her lips, but there it froze, for in his glance she read iron fixity of purpose. For a dozen breaths she endured his gaze, defiantly answering back; then, suddenly realizing her weakness, broke. In her throat rose choking sobs, her bosom heaved, she sank by the table and burst into a rain of tears. Brule looked down on her, and his

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glance softened. His hand lightly swept her hair, but without another word he stepped outside and quietly closed the door.

Long after he was gone Jeanne sobbed like a grieved child, yet in the flood-tide of her grief she was dimly conscious of the peculiar nature of her feelings. Light as had been the touch of his hand, she sensed it. She felt like a child that has first been scolded, then caressed; and she was angry because she felt so.

"I hate him!" she exclaimed, springing up and walking to and fro. "Yes, I hate him!"

She stamped her foot, then blushed to find herself emphasizing such an obvious fact. She hated Brule—she was sure of that. But deep down where the springs of consciousness have their being a secret doubt was shaking her faith in her love for Paul. Bit by bit the history of her passion pieced itself together, and the more she thought, the more obtrusive became the unwelcome feeling.

When the courier landed in Portage la Prairie with Brule's answer, the Commissioner was like to have a fit. By gathering together Red River carts, wagons, buckboards, and everything that ran on wheels, the furs had been gotten to the water; but

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his success seemed rather to have increased than diminished the Commissioner's ire. His nephew Paul, a tall fellow, strong, bony, and of a somewhat sulky countenance, was closeted with him when the courier arrived.

"What?" roared the Commissioner. "He refuses to give her up?"

"If m'sieu please," replied the breed, politely.

"You're a fool!" bellowed the Commissioner.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Is one responsible for the errors of one's parents?" he retorted.

"Why didn't you take her from him?" snapped Paul.

"Ah, yes, why?" The courier slightly raised his brows. "Does m'sieu the nephew of the Commissioner ask *this*?"

There was no mistaking the implication. Paul flushed with anger and strode forward with raised fist. "None of your insolence!" he shouted.

A black shade crept over the breed's dark face. His hand slipped to his knife, and he crouched with the quick, nervous movement of a cat. Paul stopped. "If m'sieu will have the reason," the man purr'd. "perhaps it was because one would rather see M'm'selle Jeanne wedded to a—man!"

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"Shut up, Paul!" testily interrupted the Commissioner. "What do you mean, Dupré? Drop that knife!"

Unwillingly the man's hand fell. "There are some things," he muttered, "that one would not take from the Commissioner, much less this—" His voice died to a whisper, but Paul caught the word and turned uncomfortably to the window.

The Commissioner bowed his shaggy head and thrummed on the desk. "'Come and get her myself'?" he mused. "Daughter of my old friend, too. By thunder," he roared, suddenly banging the desk, "I'll smoke this wolf from his hole and hang him high as Haman!"

"An' this will be a pretty hanging," mildly suggested the courier. "But one would advise hurry, lest the girl be left a widow."

Forty miles to the west of À la Corne, in the heart of the Ragged Lands, stands a ruined cabin. It is no longer habitable, for none but desperate men would care to dwell there; but in the days when the Commissioner was trailing northward it sheltered Jeanne Dumont. At its best, it was but a rude hut of unhewn spruce logs, plastered with mud and roofed with poplar poles, sod, and clay; but when

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Jeanne kept it, Brule lined the walls with warm blankets, hi les, and the choicest of his furs.

In the last days of March, when the Commissioner was still a day to the south of À la Corne, he brought her to this cabin. Next day, and still the next, a blizzard swept over the land; but on the morning of the third day the sun shone suddenly out, the wind veered to the south, and the new-fallen snow vanished quicker than it came.

Brule threw wide the door. "The morning is fine, m'm'selle," he said, "and here you may have more liberty. You are free to come and go, but I would advise care. Remember, these are the Ragged Lands."

He was perfectly safe in allowing her this freedom. All about stretched a wilderness of crag and lake and slough. Quaking muskegs and treacherous morasses clutched at ignorant feet, bleak sandhills upreared among gaping earth-cracks that offered a speedy passage to the bowels of Eld, and wild beasts wandered among sudden pits which peppered the scant prairie. Then, too, evil spirits—the souls of hapless wanderers—were said to flit through the wastes; and somewhere in the desolate environs gaped a great hole which sucked all that came within its radius down, down, to lakes of

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everlasting fire. A timid girl was not likely to wander far.

After that first clash of wills Brule treated her with kindness and respect. His passion was strong, to be sure, but a man's strength held it in. He wanted no light love—such were plenty in the forest—but a wife, a proper mother for his children. He never intruded on her privacy. When darkness fell he pitched a fly of bull's hide against the wall and lay athwart the door. Often, waking in the pitch of night, she heard his heavy breathing; and once she stole across the floor and looked curiously on the great figure lying so still in the red fire's glow.

But with all this deference he was deaf to all appeals to take her home. Sighs, prayers, coaxings, failed to touch him; and when from a burst of passion she passed to a flood of tears, he looked on quiet and unmoved. This she quickly realized, and his iron firmness wore down her spirit. She became quieter and ceased to complain. Sometimes of nights, when the fire blazed before the door, he sang, and she discovered that his voice was full and sweet. Soon insupportable loneliness drove her to seek his companionship, and he would relax of his sternness and tell her many a tale of flood and fire,

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of wild beasts and wilder men. Once he narrated a weird tale of the Ragged Lands, but this frightened her and he told her no more.

One evening she sat, cheek on hand, lost in thought. The April days were come and the snow gone, but a touch of frost crisped the air, so he had wrapped her about with his mooseskin coat. Out in the sloughs the frogs chattered freely, a fox barked on the prairie, an owl hooted in the timber. He noticed that she was pale, and that the hand which held her head had lost its plumpness.

"You are thinking," he queried, "of—"

"My mother," she quietly replied. Two weeks before she would have answered "Paul," but now only on occasion would the old perversity flash forth. She had come fully to understand her feeling for the Commissioner's nephew. She was, when he succeeded her dead father as Factor of Big Grass Post, of a marriageable age and fancy free. His admiration touched her vanity and ambition, of which she had a pretty woman's share. Some day he might step into his uncle's shoes. Then what could be more natural than her mother's wish to see her safely settled? So vanity, ambition, and interest had all helped to produce the feeling Jeanne mistook for love. But the rude shock



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which stirred her nature in its elemental depths had shown her the true nature of her liking.

When she answered thus, a strange look crept into Brule's face. He stealthily regarded her. He opened his mouth as though to speak, then, quickly changing his mind, held his peace. More than once that evening he seemed on the point of communicating some grave matter, but when she retired that which held his mind was still unsaid.

Late that night she roused suddenly from sleep. The door shook beneath his heavy knock, and his voice called on the outside. "Yes," she answered, sitting up.

"Rise!" he called. "Quickly!"

While she was dressing she heard the murmur of voices; but when she stepped out the midnight visitor was gone, and the thud of hoofs sounded faintly in the distance. Brule stood by the fire; his pony was hitched to a Red River cart. All was dark, no moon, and a haze hid the stars, but the glowing embers cast a red light on his face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The Commissioner," he replied, coldly, "left À la Corne at sunset. He had with him a new rope and a score of men. Come!"

Then began a long series of marches and coun-

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termarches, twistings, doublings, turnings. Like a black will-o'-the-wisp, Brule flitted through the Ragged Lands. To find a man in that earth chaos is equivalent to catching an eel in a lake of mud, and this the Commissioner soon found. Once he got stalled among the pits; then again, but for Brule's warning shout, the Commissioner's trail would have come to an end in the depths of a black morass. It was very irritating. There on the other side of the swamp stood the man they sought, giving them easy counsel; but it took a day and a half to gain the place.

"Blood of the devil!" swore the Commissioner. "I'll follow him now to the bottom hole of hell!" Yet, despite his oath, he began to tire of the chase. Besides the trials of the trail, things were not running smoothly in his camp. Paul's bullying temper kept his own men raw-edged and savage; their woodland superstitions added to the trouble; but, what was more aggravating, the men of À la Corne secretly supplied Brule with information and provision. So the endless chase went on, while the April days drew close to May.

When the Commissioner began to scrape acquaintance with the Ragged Lands, Brule cut over to the Pasquia Hills, and there was nearly caught. Think-

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ing himself at least a day's trail ahead, he had camped on the edge of a forest slough; but the Commissioner had news of him from a wandering Cree, and pressed on by the light of the moon.

At midnight Brule awoke to find them close upon him—just a strip of bush lay between. A neigh from his pony, a cry from Jeanne, and he was done. A slash of his knife silenced the beast forever; then he raised the fly that covered Jeanne. A shaft of moonlight fell athwart her face, heightening its pallor. He thought she stirred when the pony fell, but her eyes were closed, and her bosom heaved with the slow sleep-rhythm. He stood over her, knife in hand. A blood drop slipped from the point and splashed her face. She started, the eyelids contracted, but she slept on.

"Hurry, men! Hurry!" The Commissioner was speaking, and the grumbling tones of his nephew answered back. Brule's face grew black; he held his breath; his hand gripped the knife till the knuckles shone. He glanced down. She still slept. Until the creak of saddles and the thud of hoofs died he let her lie; then they started on the back trail—back to the Ragged Lands.

That long and weary march sapped the life of Jeanne. Day by day her pallor increased; she was

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getting thin, frail, and Brule began to be afraid. One night he watched her closely as, according to her wont, she read the glowing embers. It seemed he could read along with her.

"This has been a long trail," he said.

She returned a listless "Yes."

"You wish to see him—this Scotchman?"

She wearily answered that she was tired and would like to see her mother. He watched her closely. The thought of home had brought tears to her eyes, and the big drops rolled slowly down her cheeks. He turned away, rose, and paced uneasily to and fro. At last he returned to the fire and placed his hand gently on her head.

"Enough," he said, gently. "To-morrow we go to the Commissioner."

"But you," she exclaimed, in sudden fear, "he will surely hang, according to his word."

"Yes," he assented; "but was not this to be? A short shrift and a long rope? Well! Better that than to see you wedded to—"

"Alive or dead, never!" she interrupted, quickly.

"Then," he returned, "this trail has brought forth good fruit. Sleep now, for to-morrow we have a long journey."

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May-day had come, with its wealth of greenery, and for a week the Commissioner had heard nothing of Brule. He was wearied of the chase. To be sure, the man might be close at hand; but then, also, he might be trailing north towards the Arctic Circle. This was not all. Urgent advices called him south. For six weeks the business of the Company had been neglected, and no longer could it get along without its head. So, swearing a great oath to keep his rope in pickle for a better season, the Commissioner gave orders to break camp.

The morning after this decision he awoke cross as a balked tiger. He was not used to being successfully defied. He loved the daughter of his old comrade, and would like well to have had her of his family; and, to cap all, Paul was pestering him to try another dash. As he paced irritably to and fro before his tent, a shadow fell across his path.

"It's no use, Paul!" he exclaimed, without looking up. "Might as well hunt a coyote in a howling blizzard. Better give it up."

"Sometimes the wolf walks into the trap."

The Commissioner glanced up in quick surprise. Brule stood before him. He was travel-stained, his face was haggard, his eyes sombre. It had cost him something to surrender his triumph, and, had

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he known this was the moment of victory, he had never done it.

"Are—you—mad?" gasped the Commissioner.

Brule shrugged his shoulders and replied, dryly: "You do well to ask, m'sieu. A month ago I should have answered you yes."

"Where is Jeanne Dumont?"

"Here!" At the wave of his hand the girl came running from the bush.

"By the mother that bore me," roared the Commissioner, folding her in his arms, "as you have dealt with this little one, so will I deal with you!"

"Then," she whispered, returning his hearty kiss, "you must treat this—gentleman well. As such he treated me."

"Paul!" bellowed the old man. "Paul!"

Paul strode from his tent; then, seeing the girl, broke into a run. "Jeanne!" he cried; then he spied Brule. Full of jealous rage, he faced the breed. But only for a moment. Tall as Paul was, Brule looked down on him with cold, sardonic face and savage eyes. For a moment he stood fiddling with the butt of his knife, then, muttering, turned away.

"Here, Paul!" The Commissioner made to hand the girl to her lover.

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"No, no!" she whispered, clinging to him. "Not yet! Not before this man!"

"Tush!" laughed the Commissioner. "What modesty! Take her, Paul."

"I tell you no!" she cried, stamping her foot with the old fire. "I never loved him, and now I know my mind. Go!" she cried, in sudden wrath, for he was sulkily waiting with out-stretched hands.

Paul cast an evil glance upon Brule. His brow wrinkled, and a sneer trembled in the fat about his nose. "So that's the way the buck jumps, is it?" he growled. "Very well, my lady. There are flowers as fair for the picking, and some—fresher."

As the last word left his lips, Brule struck him to the ground. "Beast," he growled, spurning him heavily; "eat your words!"

"Leave him to me." The Commissioner laid a trembling hand on Brule's shoulder. He was pale with passion, his gray mane bristled, his eyes were hot. "Get up!" he thundered. "Now go to your tent and pack. To-morrow you break trail for Confidence. There, among the Eskimos, you may find your equals."

Paul well knew the meaning of that sentence—banishment to dreary arctic wastes, to herd with men that were lower than the beasts. He glanced

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appealingly up, but the old man's face was stern and hard. He turned and with hanging head slunk off.

"And now," said Brule, "what is it to be? Make an end."

The Commissioner withdrew his eyes from the receding figure of his sister's son. "I had sworn to hang you," he muttered, "and one hates to break one's word."

"But you also swore," pleaded Jeanne, "that you would deal by him as he dealt by me."

"So I did; so I did. Well," he mused, "I suppose the Company deserves a little consideration, too. It cannot well afford to lose the best man in its service. You'd better go back to À la Corne. Now off with you!"

Bowing, Brule strode to where his horse was tied in the forest. Just as he reached it, there came a quick patter of running feet, and Jeanne burst through the scrub.

"You forgot," she said, holding out her hand. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," he answered. If he saw the hand he did not heed it. She blushed, but left it extended.

"I—I—wanted to tell you something," she continued.



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"Yes?"

He was making it hard, but she was not to be robbed of this last chance. Three times the night before she had almost waked him to tell that which was on her mind.

"The night they passed in the forest," she began, blushing still deeper, "I—I—I was awake."

"*You were?*"

"Yes. You will come and see me—some day?"

"To be sure," he replied, gently, "if you wish it."

How stupid! he was! She almost despaired of him, but tried again. "And if you are of the same mind"—now he started—"bring with you a—" She got no further. How can a girl talk without breath?

"Jeanne!" shouted the Commissioner. He hardly saw the necessity of leave-taking, and she was very long about it.

"Coming!" she called. "Yes—there! That's two! Now let me go!"

"Com—ing! Oh, *please!*"

She tore loose and ran off, panting and dishevelled. "And if you are still of the same mind," she repeated from a safe distance, "bring with you a—priest!"

Then she ran hard.

THE DEVIL'S MUSKEG



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**S**HOULD it ever be your fortune to shoot over the country that lies between White Man's Lake and the Riding Mountains, keep a loon's eye open for the Devil's Keg. It will pay you. There is little to distinguish it from the common hay slough, but you may know it by this—no water gathers in the centre. Around its edges giant reeds, like regiments of busbied grenadiers, raise their brown polls on high, and spiky sedges turn a cutting edge to grasping hands. Its surface is of fat black muck, snowed with alkali, apparently dry; but if you would not follow Hamiota, the Cree, down to bottomless depths of slime, keep your feet from its treacherous levels.

Two days after I had this story of Pete Brouseaux, I asked him to swerve from his beaten trail to take a look at the Devil's Keg. As it lay only a mile to the east of his string of traps, Pete readily

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agreed. Besides, we had just killed a red fox; its hot entrails dragged from the toboggan head, and it would pay well to trail the scent.

Ten minutes afterwards the ponies plunged through the encircling wall of tangled reed and drift, and swept on to the dead level of the muskeg. The sun shone brightly down. A foot of snow, all glittering and spangled with frost diamonds, hid the black muck; and the ten feet of frozen slime which crusted the quaking deeps would have given firm footing to a running mammoth.

"See, m'sieu!" said Pete, pointing to a poplar stump that projected over the sedges. "There it was the Cree went down, an' Jean le Gros so nearly followed. He is a good boy, this Jean. Ma foi, yes! But too fond of the ladies an' they of him. Never was there a man could please them so! An' because of this he nearly die. It is not good to love too much, but worse to love too many."

The year before the Red River flood—the point in time from which all Pete's stories date—Towobat, headman of a small tribe of Crees, pitched his tepee on the north bank of White Man's Lake. After he had decorated the adjacent willows with strips of white rag—med'cine for devils—erected the tribal totem, and gone through all the other minutiae of

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shaking down, he loaded his big-wheeled Red River cart with his latest catch of skins, and creaked off to Pelly Fort.

There he got gloriously drunk; and, in his ecstasy, maundered of a marriageable daughter of surpassing beauty. Her eyes, he confidentially whispered to Pete Brousseau, would shame the full moon, her waist was slender as that of the Factor's daughter. She was round, full-bosomed, could bake bannocks that were not as blankets, and pack a hundred pounds through the heavy snow. So beautiful was she that common report had it that he, Towobat, was not her father, but that she was sprung from a god who came on her mother sleeping in the grass. All of which perfections, virtues, and accomplishments were exchangeable for one rifle, two horns of powder, and three bottles of strong water.

Unfortunately, Pete was already contracted to a woman of the Pellies, who kept a sharp hatchet against the coming of possible rivals; so, finding he would not trade, Towobat loaded himself, some bacon, and a couple of hundred of flour into his cart and creaked off to White Man's Lake. But his talk brought results. Within a week Jean le Gros stalked into the Indian camp and took a look at the girl.

She was certainly pretty; tall, well built, graceful

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—for an Indian—with large black eyes. In her hair nestled the white feather, the maiden's mark. Her skin was almost white. Whatever doubts might be cast on her divine ancestry, Towobat was certainly right in disclaiming parental honors; and a musket and two horns of powder was a small enough price.

"Waugh!" grunted the Cree, when Jean proffered it. "Him drunk, heap drunk, at Pelly! Squaw strong, big, fat, plenty work! At Norway House him fetch two rifle, four horn powder, an' sack flour."

Now, the difference between Indian drunk and Indian sober hardly justified a fluctuation in values of two hundred and fifty per cent., but Towobat held to his price. For nearly an hour they haggled. Then a hint of a possible journey to Devil's Drum, where squaws were short, brought Jean to time. The bargain was closed. Towobat pouched a birch *chit* to the Factor, and pounded his ragged pony every inch of the trail to Pelly, while Jean stole off to seek his bride.

He found her on the outskirts of the camp. She was sitting on a ridge that runs out into White Man's Lake. Behind her the brown prairies scorched in the sun; across the lake loomed the green

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mountains. A gentle breeze checkered the water with vivid patches of crimson, brown, and yellow leaves. She rose at his step, and stood, looking sulkily upon him.

"Lau is now my woman," he said in Cree. "Let her come to my tepee." She made no answer, but stood, pouting her full lips that were red as the wild cherry. "Yes," he added, by way of compliment and to tempt her; "it is said that Lau's bannock is fit for the Commissioner, and that the venison tenders in her hands. In my tepee is much flour, also bacon; great stores of sharp knives, and red blankets that are very warm."

She made no answer. Generally the Indian girls were overready to take a white husband, and, though puzzled, he put out his hand to take the white feather from her hair. His fingers had almost closed on it when, with a laugh, she sprang from beneath his hand. Her robe dropped from her shoulders. He got one flashing glimpse of a rounded body outlined against the silvery birch; then, like a brown arrow, she shot through the air and clove the sunlit waters.

Now, the summers of Jean's youth had been mostly spent on the mighty bosom of the St. Lawrence, and though a man may forget relatives,



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friends, enemies, even the wife of his bosom, skill in swimming he may not forget. So, when the girl rose fifty yards from the shore, she found Jean speeding along in her wake. He swam heavily, to be sure, and puffed like a grampus, but his great body shore through the water. And the girl, too, swam well, with a long overhand stroke. At every reach her body flashed its length in the sunlight, lay for an instant cradled in foam, then sank in the limpid water.

By the time they had half crossed the lake, Jean's strength began to tell. Gradually the distance lessened until he could have placed a hand upon her shoulder, but when he reached, she dived, coming up twenty yards to the right. Again he caught up, to have the dive repeated; and again and again, and still again, she slipped from his hand. Yet despite her every trick and turn he kept so close that when she left the water he was close behind.

Once in the woods, the waving branches marked her passing, and in five minutes he had run her down. Hot, gasping, panting like a chased hare, but still defiant, she faced him in a woodland dell. Jean the Big looked down on her with smiling eyes. He was wet, his clothing clung to his body; he looked and felt like some huge amphibian, yet he was still Jean the Good-Natured.

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"The Cree maidens swim like the jack-fish and run like the red deer," he laughed. "Could they but fly like the mallard, they might escape the marrying yoke." He reached towards the feather, but she drew quickly away and smote his hand smartly. "So!" he exclaimed, softly. "She must needs fight!"

Seizing her by the shoulder, he pulled her towards him, and the next moment was lying on his back. The moment he pulled she had pitched forward, tripping at the same time, and Jean had thrown himself. It was a wrestling trick of his own, but who would have expected it from a girl? Angry and ashamed, he sprang up and seized her. She struggled fiercely, but her obstinate resistance simply made him more determined. Grasping her by the waist, he tore her loose and swung her up to the stretch of his arms. And there he held her, watching the fear gather in her eyes.

"Pouf!" he exclaimed, suddenly setting her down. "There is nothing to fear, little one. Jean le Gros wants love that is freely given. Let Lau return to her father's tepee."

As he turned to go a low laugh sounded in the dell, and a gentle hand touched his shoulder.

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Slipping to her knees, Lau slid the feather from her hair and laid it shyly in his palm.

Being thus well married after the fashion of the Crees, who stole the rite from the Bones, who took it from the Mound-Builders, who inherited it from Father Adam, Jean le Gros built a cabin hard by White Man's Lake and settled down to family life. Lau was now a person of importance in her tribe, and bore herself accordingly. She walked, *nez retroussé*, by the bucks, who in the days of her virginity had laid fat puppies at her feet, while her tribeswomen turned a greedy ear to her tale of bead and skin, blanket and provision, and other wondrous matters of her housekeeping. To these, her own people, she was cold and haughty, as became the wife of a *mooniah*, but Jean she loved with the furious passion that is sometimes disconcerting to its less emotional object.

Yet this excess of love had its advantages. She sought to do the things that pleased him best. His cabin was always neat and clean, his bannock sweet, his meat well cooked and tender. And she was greedy to learn. One day Father Francis found her squatting in his kitchen at Ellice while she gravely noted the movements of Pierre Recard, the mission cook. And ten minutes thereafter a tremendous

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smash brought him flying to the rescue of the same Pierre, who lay amid the ruins of his largest platter, with Lau brandishing a cleaver above his head. Then there was great inquisition. For three days Pierre did penance for the sin of his eyes, but Lau had to go elsewhere for lessons in cookery.

But soon winter closed in. Ten feet of solid ice mailed the lake, and the Devil's Keg gurgled helplessly beneath its winter coat. Sometimes a blizzard tore over the lake, threatening to twist Jean's cabin up by the roots, and then the frost would come out of the north; the mercury would drop to seventy and odd below, and a great hush, broken only by the pistol-crack of freezing trees, brooded over the forest. But it was warm within the cabin. A half cord of dry poplar crackled in the wide chimney, and sent a stream of spark and flame high above the roof-tree. On milder days Jean cut wood and visited his traps.

And so the winter passed. The sun returned from the Southland to the music of running waters. Day by day his arc increased across the sky; but it was in this, the eighth month of her married life, that Lau's sun went out. With the first spring days came orders for Jean le Gros to trail north and run the season's pack from Norway House.

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The evening before his departure they were at the cabin door, looking down the lake. A thunder-shower had just blown by. The air was cool and sweet, the wind moaned in the poplar, and shadows of gray clouds leadened the white-capped water. Jean leaned against the wall smoking; Lau crouched at his feet.

"We have been happy." She spoke in dull, hopeless tones.

"I shall return."

"But the daughter of the Factor of Norway House?" she went on, with darkening eyes. "She is beautiful, it is said. I hate her!"

"Am I not married to thee, Lau?"

She nodded. "Yes, after the fashion of my people, which binds not the men of the Company. Was not the Factor of Devil's Drum married to Saas, daughter of Clear Sky, the Sioux? She bore him three children, yet did he afterwards marry a soft woman of his own breed."

"Bah!" Big Jean stooped and lifted her to his knee. "I am not Black Jack, but Jean le Gros. There is none like my Lau. See you, little one, this is an order of the Company. I go to Norway House? Yes! But surely will I return to thee."

"Some day! I know it," she returned, thought-

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fully. "And after that will marry with one of thy own race. But it is meet," she continued, resignedly, "that wolf mate with wolf. But the little she-fox that ran with the wolf—what of her? For her folly shall she be torn and eaten. Yet I have loved."

Creeping close, she ceased, and allowed present joy to smother the prescience of coming sorrow. For hours they sat thus; but when at last the copper moon slipped from behind a storm-cloud, they rose and closed the cabin door.

A month or so after Jean le Gros crossed the fifty-fourth parallel on his journey northward, the wanderer entered into Towobat and his band, and laid them by the heels. They made great preparation for a moose hunt, northerly to the Pasquia Hills. Towobat would have liked well to take Lau along. Unmarried trappers were plentiful at Fort à la Corne, and Towobat's experience did not lead him to expect the return of Jean le Gros. There was really no reason why she should not take another man. But when he entered her cabin and gave orders to pack, she turned on him, hatchet in hand. Towobat fled. It was nip and tuck. For twenty yards he ran a smart race with death, and won—by a nose. But he lost an ear. As he shot

## THE PROBATIONER

through the doorway her hatchet whistled by, shaving the ear as clean as a surgeon's knife. And while the hatchet stuck quivering in a tree, Towobat increased his lead, thanking his gods the while for the excess of rage that offset his daughter's lack of filial piety.

So the tribe marched without her. For a week the smoke of burning bush by day and the red sky glow at night kept her posted on its movements; then, as the deer scared to the north, the sign failed. Jean had left her well supplied. Of flour and bacon she had enough to last the summer. Jack-fish she speared in the shallows, where the lake overflow seeps into the Devil's Keg, saskatoons were to be had for the picking on the prairie, and cranberries were plentiful in the bush.

She was happy after a fashion, living, woman-like, in her dream of love, though the practical savage way of looking naked truth in the face assured her of its ultimate ending. But he might come back—for a little longer. Often she walked over to the hog's-back where Jean found her, and slipping, awake, from her blanket, gazed on the reflection in the water. A dark face flushed with red, white teeth, misty black eyes, these she saw dancing, elflike. With the rounded body she had



## THE DEVIL'S MUSKIEG

no quarrel; nor with the masses of knee-long hair, 'save perhaps they were a trifle straight. But that dark skin! Frowning, she would dash her foot across the image, dissolving it in a thousand ripples, then, quickly diving, she would swim over the old course, plunge into the woods, and lie in the little dell.

But in the third month of her loneliness she received news of Jean, and it came in this wise. Returning from her fishing, she saw at a hundred yards her cabin door standing wide. Surely Jean must have returned, she thought. Eagerly she flew over the intervening space, but halted dead on the threshold. On the mud floor a blanket was spread, and on it was piled her store of beads and moccasins, knives, cooking utensils, the skins from her bed, and all her provisions. Behind the heap, calm, impassive, but threatening, stood Hamiota, the Lame Wolf, the one of all her former suitors whom she feared.

"Waugh!" he growled. "Lau has been long at the fishing. Tie up, that we may be going." He pointed to the bundle.

Laying down her fish and spear, she stepped forward, sullen but obedient, her lashes cast down to hide her eyes.



## THE PROBATIONER

"I have paid," he continued, pinching his fingers into the flesh of her arm, "a great price in skins to the old fox, Towobat. Come!"

She sank beside the pile drew together the ends of the blanket and knotted them, then, rising, waited for further orders.

"Marche!"

She hoisted the bundle and stepped to the door, then stopped and set it down. "Stay," she said, "there is the money of the Red Bear—the big dollars of silver buried in the earth beneath the bed."

Tearing the bunk to one side, she drove the fish-spear into the ground close to the wall. The Cree stood over, watching with greedy eyes. Presently, when the ground was well loosened, she began to throw out the dirt. A little more digging, and the spear stuck in something solid. It looked like a square box. She stooped down and tried to raise it, but failed.

"It is heavy!" she panted.

"Lau has become soft," sneered the Cree. "She has lain too close and warm. Stand aside!"

As he bent to the hole, she raised the sharp fish-spear and struck down betwixt his shoulders. Through and through it pierced, standing out

## THE DEVIL'S MUSKIE

beyond his breast. Shuddering, he fell forward, driving the barb back within his breast, and writhed on the ground wormlike, the black blood pouring from his mouth.

"So Lau is soft?" she cried. "Yet would it have tried the strength of even Hamiota to lift the sill of the cabin. Now listen," she went on, stooping to the level of his eyes; "Hamiota would have forced me to mate with him. Like a fish he wriggles. And when the Red Bear comes to his den, then shall I, lying in his arms, tell of the folly of Hamiota, and how he died at the hand of a squaw."

Through the man's dulling ear the name penetrated to the darkening chambers of his brain. He looked up. His eyes were glazing, his tongue strove desperately with the black blood for one last utterance.

"The — Red — Bear!" he gasped. "The — Red — Bear — mates with — one of — his breed!"

Lau caught her breath, and for a brief space looked down on the dying man. Then she seized him by the shoulders and shook him violently. "Liar!" she muttered, hoarsely. "Liar! Tell me more of this."

But the Lame Wolf had already limped over the great divide, and answered not her challenge. She

## THE PROBATIONER

rose with fear and trouble in her eyes, and sat down on the bed to think. For a long half-hour she brooded. Her gaze rested on the stricken Cree, but she saw him not; her thoughts were travelling to Jean le Gros. Was it possible that Hamiota had news of him?

"Bah!" she exclaimed, rising and passing her hand across her brow. "He was ever a liar!" She spoke confidently, but a deadly fear gripped her heart. And though she kept on assuring herself that he had lied, she felt there would be no peace till she knew for certain.

Hastily she dragged the body forth and loaded it on her wood-sled. Ten minutes therefrom the Devil's Keg opened its greedy maw, and with a sucking splash the Lame Wolf started on his long journey in its bottomless depths. Then, after ridding up her house—for Jean le Gros might come back while she was gone—Lau broke trail for Pelly.

There she got news: Jean was to be married shortly to Virginie, daughter of the Factor of Norway House. When the last word was spoken she drew the blanket over her head, and, unmindful of pitying words, departed for her place. They watched her down the trail, a lonely figure limping its solitary way over the illimitable prairies back to the savage woods.

## THE DEVIL'S MUSKEG

On the third day following her departure, worn, weary, hopeless, she crawled into her cabin and lay like a stricken deer.

"You will have notice, m'sieu," said Pete Brouseaux, when telling this story, "what a great hunter is the devil? See you, a man makes his cake, but the devil bakes it. An' so it is with this Jean le Gros. He is by order of the Company named Factor of Big Grass Post. He will marry presently the prettiest girl of the North. Yes! Then, by Gar, he must needs kiss good-bye to his ol' sweetheart! Was there ever so much of a fool?"

But when Jean le Gros rode south to get his appointment of the Commissioner he had no intention of seeing his Indian wife. His mind was perfectly at ease in the matter. Had he not made full confession to Father La Rivière, and received absolution, along with the intimation that it was his duty to marry with his own kind and raise stout children to Holy Church? Then, he had but done as others did. Lau would probably follow his example and take another husband. Here came the first twinge of conscience. For, though man loves to browse in pastures new, it shocks him not a little to think that similar inclinations may trouble his womankind.

While under the smile of the Factor's daughter,

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the feeling was bearable, but its strength increased in proportion to the distance he travelled south; and at last it was sufficiently strong to swerve him from the path of duty—as laid down by the holy father—and the Pelly Trail.

"What think you?" he said to France Dubois, his fellow-traveller. "Would it not be one shame to pass so near the old cabin an' no' bid the girl adieu?"

Being unmarried and of a warm fancy, France agreed that it would. Now that he was thus committed, Jean's feelings underwent a further revolution. The figure of Lau danced before him clothed with all the fascination of the forbidden. After all, he reasoned, she knew nothing! Why disturb her happiness? Let her love a little longer! Then, there could be no harm in it. As for Virginie—well, she was a sad flirt. Even now she would be making eyes at the English clerk.

Thus it came about that at Ten-Mile Forks France held on to Pelly, while Jean spurred hotly to White Man's Lake. As his horse splashed through the shallows where Lau took her fish, the dusky sun sank over the edge of the world, but the great flat moon sailed high and lit him up the bank. Bathed in its brilliant light, lake, wood, and bluff stood clearly out, lacking but the colors of the day. Over

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him a black cloud swept with rush of beating wings, the ducks quacked and quarrelled on the waters, the frogs chattered, and the owls hooted in the forest.

At the top of the bank he reined in, clapped hands to mouth, and gave forth a piercing bush-yell. Shrill and clear, it reverberated from shore to shore and raised a thousand echoes in the sleeping woods. Before the last answer died, he was riding along the bank above the Devil's Keg. Beneath him it fell sheer to the black morass; a false step, a stumble, spelled death.

Suddenly he reined his horse back on his haunches, almost throwing him over the bank. A sombre figure, like a black pillar in the white light, stood squarely in his path. For the space of a dozen breaths he sat his horse, staring; then the blanket rolled from the figure's head.

"Lau?"

"'Yes,' said I," she answered, talking to herself. "'He will come again—once. Then will the little she-fox be torn in many pieces.'"

The tone was low, but he heard. "See you, little one," he laughed, "said I not that I would return? Here am I! There is none like my Lau!" The words rang cheerily, but the consciousness of their falseness kept him at his distance.

## THE PROBATIONER

"Hast thou truly returned, Red Bear—to me?"

He hesitated. Her face looked strange. The moonlight softened and toned down the harsh lines of sorrow, but her eyes glowed with a black fire. Once, of a dark night, he had gazed into the eyes of a mountain-lion just before he made his leap. They looked like these.

"Truly I have come back to thee!" Perhaps he meant it—just then. His words sounded sincere.

"Liar!"

She ran forward, arms stretched above her head. The horse snorted, reared, wheeled, poised for a second in mid-air, then launched out over the Devil's Keg. As he left the bank Jean slipped the stirrups—too late! The brute shot from beneath him, and they dropped, a few feet apart, into the sucking clutch. Over them, clearly outlined against the dark-blue sky, stood the mad woman.

"Truly," she cried, laughing shrilly, "thou hast returned to me!"

She stretched over the gulf. Jean had already sunk to the knees, and the keg sucked and pulled on his feet. He stood still and quiet. This was death, slow death, for cowards; for him simply burial. Already his knife was in his hand. Two yards to

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his right the horse weltered in a flurry of black mud, sinking deeper at every struggle. Leaning over, Jean cut the brute's throat. There was yet plenty of time for himself. The Devil's Muskeg does not haste in devouring its victims. It needs not, for there is no escape.

"Thou hast returned!" she called again. "Come, then!" She spread wide her arms. "No? Then open for me!"

With the last word she sprang wildly out and fell beside him. Jean sheathed his knife, slipped his arm about her, and tried to lift her clear. Then he bent over, scooped the mud from her ankles, and tried again. With a squelch, her feet pulled from the clutch of the keg, and he swung her up to the full stretch of his arms; and, looking down, Lau remembered the day in the forest. The cloud swept from her hot brain; she saw, and realized where she was.

"Set me down," she said, quietly, all trace of madness gone. "Set me beneath thy knees and let me die the first; for I brought this trouble on thee, my love."

"No!" he answered, looking into her eyes. "In this thou art innocent, and I am well served. And there is work for thee. Go to the Factor of Pelly,



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and tell him to send word of this to Norway House. There is one there that should know. Though," he muttered, "she will soon be comforted. And bid him also," he continued, aloud, "tell Father Francis to say a mass for the soul of Jean le Gros."

There was no time for more. The Devil's Keg lingers over its victims like some huge gourmand, but beneath the double weight Jean was sinking fast. Just opposite, a cave-in of the bank had swung a leafy poplar down and out over the muskeg. The branches trailed in the mud a few feet beyond his reach. On this he fixed his eyes. Swinging quickly back, he threw smartly forward and hurled Lau's light body up into the tree.

She landed fairly in the centre, striking her head against the trunk, and lay stunned. Up and down tossed the tree. It seemed as if its living freight must drop back. Jean watched with anxious eyes; if she fell, it would be beyond his reach. But soon the heaving subsided, the tree rested, and she still lay among the branches.

With a sigh of relief Jean turned to his own affairs. He was already down to the waist. The keg gurgled beneath him, and sounds like the smacking of great lips were all about him. The clutch at his heels throbbed with the rhythm of a pulse. Slipping

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his knife, he got ready against the time when the mud should touch his armpits.

Ten minutes passed—fifteen—and the girl had not moved. Five minutes more, and the chill slime touched his breastbone. Now it was time. Raising the knife, he turned a last glance on the still figure. Surely she stirred! He hesitated. She moved, sat up, and caught the glint of the steel in his hand.

"No!" she cried. "No, Jean! Not yet! The horse! The horse! The lariat at the saddle bow!"

The beast's last struggle had brought him within easy reach. A ray of hope shot into Jean's mind. Leaning over, he paddled in the mud. She watched him breathlessly. Presently he raised his hand, and a black, dripping string followed it above the surface. A slash of the knife freed the saddle end, and Lau caught the noose as it flew from his hand.

She fastened it in the tree, and Jean le Gros began his battle with the Devil's Keg. The gluey, viscid muck seemed to suck with a thousand mouths, but slowly he drew towards the tree. When his strength failed, he passed a turn of the rope about his waist, and the woman held what he had gained. Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard, he fought his way,

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and at last, pale, trembling, damp with sweat, he fell against the bank.

Lau slipped from the tree and helped him up the steep; then she took his head on her lap and wiped his brow. He was drained of strength and lay weak as a child.

"I have not deserved—" he began, but she covered his mouth with her hand. He kissed it and lay still. Half an hour slipped by. A great hush brooded over the forest. The frogs had ceased their chatter, the owl his solemn questioning, and the lonely bittern forgot his solitary cry.

"Come," he said, rising. "Let us go home."

She paused, questioning him with her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The—other—woman?"

"There is but one woman," he answered, gently.

"Come! For to-morrow we go to Father Francis."

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## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE



## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

**I**T is well to be in-doors when the smothering blizzard cuts loose in the Northland and turns five hundred thousand miles of prairie into a white and whirling hell; and so thought the Pelly trappers. They hunched up to the red stove in the big log store and listened to the voice of the storm. It was intensely cold. The spirit thermometer on the log veranda registered sixty-five below zero, every nail and scrap of door iron was embossed with glittering frost, and an inch of clouded ice covered the window-panes. Outside, the furious wind, veering from every point of the compass, now walled the fort with circling clouds of snow; then, changing tactics, blew steadily from one direction, threatening to bury it beneath monstrous drifts. Suddenly it dropped, and the falling snow settled in straight lines.

"Storm over?" A man glanced up.

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"Bah!" A half-breed trapper, who had just come in, tugged at his frozen beard and shrugged his shoulders. "He just begin. Listen!"

Far off the sigh of the wind rose to a sob, a moan, a shriek; then, with thunderous roar, the storm struck the building.

"So!" continued the breed, unwinding a long neck-scarf. "He ees the king blizzard. Soon we have spreeng, eh? This dam cloth! No loose yet." A solid inch of ice gripped scarf and beard.

"Guess you're right, Brousseaux," chipped in another man. "You made the fort just in the nick of time, old man. Here, stick that goatee o' yourn on this." The breed thrust out his chin. Placing an axe head beneath the beard, the man gently crushed the ice with the poker.

"There," he said. "Talk less on the trail, Pete, an' you'll have less ice in your whiskers."

"Thanks! Yes, I will have your advice." He combed the beard with his fingers. "It ees a hard trail, the Pelly. An' in a blizzard! This ees better, eh?"

"Anythin' new on the plains?"

"Ah, now you spick, my friend. Ees ther' news? Of a sort, yes." He rubbed his hands, as a cat paws herself, and his face darkened.

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

"Good?"

"Who knows? I have listen to the cry of a man child born to the great prairie. That ees good! Men are few, comrades die. The child mus' bear hees mother's name—this ees bad! It was best for boy to have father."

"What's this, Pete?" A big Englishman sitting next the breed laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"It ees you, Elliot? Yes, you shall hear, but first—more wood. The frost, he's in my bones." When quarter of a cord of dry poplar was roaring in the furnace he hitched closer and spread his palms to the heat. "Yes," he continued, "it was bad, ver' bad, for May Dupré that her father die—"

"What? Louis Dupré?"

Brousseaux nodded. "Oui! Louis have kill hees las' moose an' trap hees las' mink, an' so much the worse for hees daughtaire."

"A good man gone to glory!" "Best shot on the plains!" "Guided the Red River expedition under Wolseley in the seventies!" came from around the circle. The breed waited for the last tribute of respect.

"An' so much," he repeated, "the worse for hees daughtaire. You see"—reaching for the Englishman's pipe—"las' spreng Dupré an' Glen Cameron



## THE PROBATIONER

hunt north of Lak' Winnipegosis. They build cabin at Big Moose Lak', an' May cook hees grub. Las' June Dupré fall seeck, ver' seeck. Soon he die. They bury heem. Then—ah, well"—with an expressive shrug—"what would you? The girl was pretty, the man han'some an' strong. They hunt till first snows. Then Glen bring the girl to Ellice while he go to Winnipeg. Before he return—the child ees born."

He stopped. The men leaned to the stove, silently smoking, listening to the storm, brooding over his words. They were a hard-bit lot, swept from the four corners of the earth and dumped in this little corner of the frozen north; yet each had his code of honor, his notions of morality, and a strong sense of justice. Their own forest loves they conducted very much after the fashion of Father Adam; but this was a woman of their blood, subject to a different law. Had she male kin, they would have noted the incident with mild interest, expecting a red atonement; but she was an orphan.

From the law she could get no redress. True, by hard stretching, its long arm just reached the fifty-third parallel, but its clutch was, at best, spasmodic and uncertain. And she had grown to womanhood beneath their eyes; was one of them

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

—a member of that community which counts its neighbors from Winnipeg to Fort McCloud, from Pembina to the arctic. Her wrong was theirs—theirs its righting.

"Won't he marry her?" asked Elliot.

Brousseau shook his head. "No, my friend," he answered, slowly. "Was there ever before so much of a fool? A girl, pretty; a man child, strong and fat; an' marry? No! An' all because of the hot word of a fool priest. But"—shaking his head—"he was ever stiff in hees neck, this Glen Cameron. Strong as a buffalo, straight as a young poplar, mark you, with a tongue of fire an' a devil temper. An ill man to meddle with! Ma foi! Yes."

"I know the breed," mused Elliot. "Aberdeen granite foundation, dash of French pepper, and *blood* enough to make 'em sullen. But what's this about the parson, Pete?"

"The priest? You know heem, Père Francis—Ellice Mission."

"Fussy little fool!"

"As you say! Well, he spick beeg word, ver' beeg, to this thick in hees head Scotchman. It is well to spick, yes, but softly, so hees word tickle hees ears, but 'Scoundrel! Marry or I curse!'" Brousseau lifted his eyebrows. "This to a man?"

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It ees bad. But for the priest Glen marry the girl."

"A praste, a woman, to raise the divil," growled Irish Dan, "an' its meself knows the combination. Whin Father O'Toole put the ban on Biddy—"

"Dry up, Dan!" "Save your wind!" "We know what happened the father!" shouted the men. "Ought to," added Elliot; "he's told us forty times."

"Begor," gumbled the Irishman, "wudn't yez let a man tell his little story, ye haythen thaves? Fire up, Recarde, it's gettin' colder. It's wastin' I am in front an' freezin' behind, be the same token."

He turned his back to the stove and watched the powdery snow sifting through the key-hole. It stretched from the door to his feet, forming a miniature mountain range across the floor. Brouseaux leaned, catlike, over the stove, heating the marrow in his bones for the next day's trail—he was due at Fort à la Corne, one hundred miles away, in two days' time. Outside, the snow hissed along ahead of the nor'wester; the building shook beneath the blows of the storm; the wind sobbed and wailed in the chimney; the windows rattled in the casements. The men smoked quietly. Some were travelling frozen trails with the dead trapper,

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

others were thinking of his daughter. The iron clang of the stove door broke the silence. The Irishman was stoking up.

"Where's Glen now?" a man asked.

"Winnipeg. Come back in the spreng."

"An' May?"

"With Stewart, Factor of Ellice."

"She's in good hands," said Elliot. He glanced interrogatively round the circle. "Well, boys?"

A man rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe—a tall Canadian, a son of Anak, standing six feet six in his moccasins, straight as a pine, with a splendidly formed body. He yawned. As he stretched, his knotty hands touched the spruce rafters, and his body loomed up like a stocky oak.

"Boys," he growled, "we're a-goin' to play a han' in this game. I reckon May Dupré don't lie in the mud while there's man or gun in Pelly."

"Now you spick, Bill Angus," muttered Brouseaux.

The south wind was eating the snow, and water, strangely unfamiliar, covered the slough ice before Glen Cameron returned from Winnipeg. Above him travelled the big mallard and the wild goose, heralds of coming spring. Along the great valley

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of the Assiniboine the forest awoke from its long sleep and gave vent to arboreal yawns, sighs, and soughings; the music of running waters delighted ears tuned to the stern hiss of drifting snow, and the doors of Ellice flung wide to admit the warm sunshine of the first spring days.

Glen had settled in his cabin on the table-land above the fort a couple of weeks before the news travelled to Pelly. He lived alone. His father, the old Factor of Devil's Drum, had, when Glen's head topped his boot, mixed things badly with a bull moose, and the mould of eighteen summers covered his forest grave. His mother lived in Winnipeg on a pension allowed her by the Company. Through her he inherited a strain of French-Cree blood, slight, but sufficient to speck his blue eyes with spots of darkest brown and to touch his temper with sullenness. This lick of the blood was favored by birth and raising. He got his first notions of life along with his first nourishment from a Cree foster-mother, and this strange conjunction of blood and breeding produced the stiffest man north of fifty-three.

Three weeks passed without his going near Ellice. Ostensibly, he was preparing for a hunting to the north, yet constantly upon some pretext he de-

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ferred his departure. The real reason he never acknowledged until, one Saturday, Pete Brousseau, carrying the northern mail, dropped in and, along with his letters, gave him the news.

"As you say, ver' fine weather, bon! Ma foi! Yes! An' you will be goin' to the christening to-morrow, eh?"

After Pete had gone, wondering at the look in Glen's face, he paced back and forth like a caged beast. The sun went down on his walking, and the gray lights of dawn found him walking. When the morning brightened a little he banged the cabin door and strode off in the direction of the fort.

Very shortly the winding trail brought him to the valley. Eight hundred feet below the swift Assiniboine writhed in giant convolutions along the level bottoms. On the eastern horizon the rising sun, a molten disk, gleamed through a cloud-glory of ruby and gold. Gray shadows shrouded the river, and towards these, down the steep headlands, crept the rosy flush of the morning. Glen stopped and gazed at the vermilion splendors of cloud and sky. Then, from his right, the mission bells of Ellice pealed forth the matin chime. Clear, silvery, resonant, the wave of sound flooded the valley to

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the distant hills, echoed in the black ravines, and filled the air with rippling music.

The man's face took on a softer look. Those bells had tolled the knell of his father, and they called back vivid memories of childhood days. He bowed his head until the last vibrant echo died in the black ravines; then the sun rose high above the horizon, and things took on their workaday aspect. The mood passed. He walked on to the mission chapel, where, leaving the trail, he crept into a poplar bluff and lay down in the grass.

Little by little the fort quickened into life. Smoke rose from the Factor's chimney, and then tinkling bells told of cows wandering to pasture in the bottoms. Gray squirrels popped from holes, examined the trespasser, and skipped off about the serious business of life. Cheeky gophers decided their matrimonial squabbles beneath his nose, but he saw them not, as he lay quietly watching the smoke.

A couple of hours passed before an old trapper hobbled over to prepare the chapel for service. Glen could hear him moving inside, opening windows, sweeping, and dusting the altar. He finished. There was quiet; then, suddenly, the mass bell swung above his head, and its solemn chime echoed through the valley

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

And now across the prairie sounded the creak of huge-wheeled Red River carts—Father Francis's Indian converts coming from the reservation. They groaned up to the chapel door and discharged their loads of broad-faced, chattering squaws. After them a dozen silent Indians filed into the mission. A few scattering settlers came afoot, on horse, or driving buckboards. The Hudson Bay men lounged over from the fort, but before they could enter the building a half-score mounted men swept round a poplar bluff—the Pelly trappers come to lend a hand in christening Dupré's grandchild. Then, black-cassocked, portly, with mass-book under arm, Father Francis stepped from his house and strode across the yard.

At last the Factor's door opened. Two women came out and moved towards the chapel. Glen got to his knees and stared. She was looking well! Her face was beautiful as ever, and maternity had given a needed roundness to her figure. He noted the tender droop of the lip as she bent over the child. Yes, she certainly looked well and—a jealous pang nipped him hard—happy! This was not what he expected, and he tried to tell himself that he was glad, but—what a fool he had been! She whom he had left clothed in the ugliness of form



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which precedes the birth of life had blossomed as the butterfly from the chrysalis. She entered the church, and the priest began to intone the mass

"In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti !"

"Amen!" answered the quavering voice of the clerk.

How familiar, but—how long! It seemed to the impatient man that the interminable responses would never have done. At the "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," he unconsciously beat his breast. At last the priest's voice hushed. There came an expectant rustle, and through the open window there travelled the wail of an infant. Glen started and half rose, but the voice of Father Francis sent him back.

"And now we will proceed with the holy service of baptism, a sacrament ordained of God and consecrated by the usage of Peter and Paul, His holy apostles."

Once more the rustle, mixed with murmuring voices and shuffling feet. The child wailed again, thrilling the man with strange emotion. He heard the mother hushing it. His straining ear caught the swish of her skirts as she rocked to and fro; then silence.

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

"The name of the father of this child?"

Dead silence. Glen sprang to his feet and made for the chapel door. He was on fire. He could see, in imagination, the girl meekly standing before the accusing priest. Half-way he stopped. The Factor was speaking.

"Till some guid mon shares his name wi' this puir misdealt lassie, I'll be father till the laddie. He tak's my name."

"Who stands sponsor for this child?"

"We do!" Like the growl of distant thunder the response rolled from the throats of the Pelly trappers.

"And dost thou, William Stewart, renounce Satan, his pomp and works?"

"I do!" the sponsors answered.

"Dost thou believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"

"I do believe!"

"Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, Who was born into this world and suffered for us?"

"I do believe!"

"Then in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, I baptize thee, William Stewart. May our blessed Lady make intercession

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at the throne of the Most High, that the stain of wedless birth be not cast against thee!"

"Amen!"

Strong and fervent, mixed with the gutturals of the Indians, the answer passed through the open windows and died far out on the prairie. An old Gregorian chant finished the service; then, laughing and exchanging greetings, the congregation tumbled out-of-doors—the good, the bad, and the indifferent rubbing elbows, and none to tell the difference.

For a while the young mother stood in a ring of squaws, watching her baby passing from breast to breast. The red women clucked their wonderment at the exceeding whiteness of his skin. After dowering him with small moccasins worked curiously in beads, they mounted the crazy carts and drove off across the prairie. Then the Factor took the baby and presented him to his numerous fathers in God; and the men of Pelly manoeuvred him as though he were a jewel of great price, liable to break in the handling. The stout arms of Bill Angus trembled beneath the load, and he sweated profusely till relieved of the burden. They all agreed there never was such a baby.

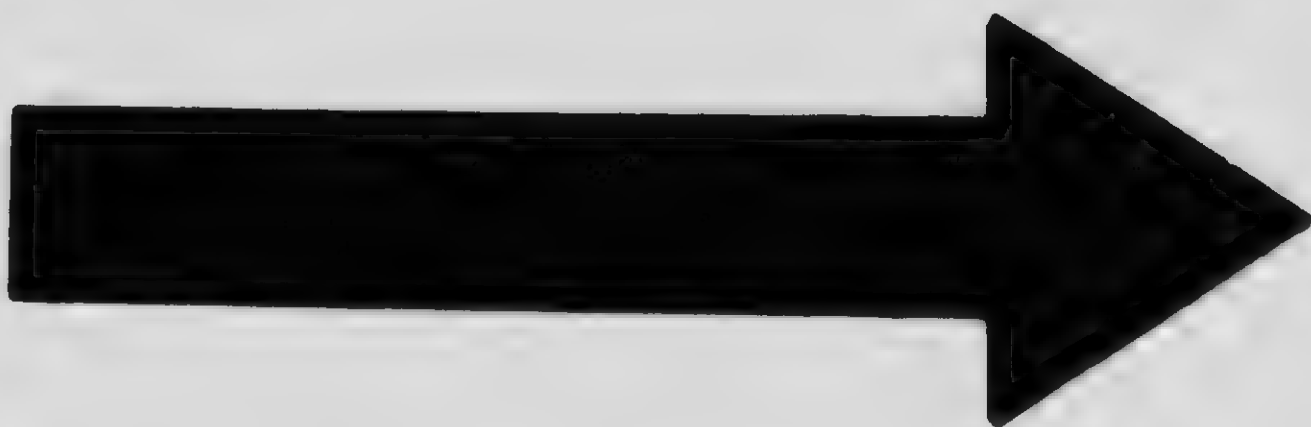
Then came the birth offering. Long knives, damascened in silver or gold; rifles that—in the

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

hands of a northman — never missed; belts, pouches, and other gear of war and the chase, were laid at the baby's feet. Bill Angus presented him with the deed of a square mile of land, and Recarde with a stack of beaver, to be trapped the coming summer; but Pete Brousseau, the cunning, broke all their hearts. With a shy grin he brought forth a resplendent rattle, wondrously tipped with rubber, and especially warranted to be efficacious in teething.

When the giving was over, the Pelly men hobbled their horses and strolled off to the fort along with their Ellice comrades. Ten minutes afterwards the head of the last settler hobbled out of sight behind the long roll of the prairie, and Glen was alone. He waited until the Factor's door closed on woman and child, then took the road home.

Just before the trail swung from the valley a cloud hid the sun. Instantly the smiling peace vanished, and the landscape clothed itself in naked savagery. From the black of the tree-lined ravines the bald headlands stood forth like the breasts of a proud woman. A chilly wind came out of the west and moaned in the sombre spruce, while on the horizon smoky thunder-heads piled fleece on fleece. The change suited Glen's mood. He gazed his fill, then held on to his solitary cabin.



# MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

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## THE PROBATIONER

By sundown black clouds covered the sky, and the roll of distant thunder announced the coming storm. With night came the first rain—big drops, hitting the ground with a thud. Gray shapes turned and twisted between earth and sky; the lightning quivered all around. The air was sultry, and the windows of the Factor's house stood open.

May Dupré sat in her bedroom, watching the approach of the storm. The baby was sleeping quietly. She had laid off her dress for the night, and her neck and arms gleamed in the flashing lightning like polished marble. A gust of wind swept the rain into her room. She raised her hand to close the window, then paused, listening. The thud of horses! And from the fort! Surely the Pelly men would never take the trail on such a night?

A splitting crash overhead started her back, but in the following flash she saw a score of horsemen. A man was coming towards the house. She heard his knock and whispering. A name rose to her window.

"Hush!" warned the Factor. "The lassie's windy's open."

She leaned forward, straining her ears to catch the whispers. Through the darkness she made out

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the figure of Bill Angus. In the dim light his long body took on an additional cubit, and his immense width, fading into the gloom, conveyed an impression of indefinite extension.

"I'll hae naught to do wi' it," finished the Factor, aloud. "Gang yer ain gait, Bill Angus."

"Please yerself," answered the giant. "He swings."

The girl gasped, and staggered back to the bed. Hang, they said! No! No! It must not be! She had long ago forgiven. And—she still loved.

Her preparations were quickly made. Picking up the baby, she placed him to the breast and coaxed him to repletion. Then, with the little head bowed in slumber, she tucked him warmly in bed, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and crept softly down-stairs.

The Factor had gone to bed; she could hear his heavy breathing. She opened the door carefully and slipped outside, but as she turned to close it the shawl swept away on the wind. She hesitated, then plunged on into the blackness. The rain splashed on her naked arms and breast, but she moved steadily forward, feeling the trail with her feet. A crash of thunder broke overhead. A brilliant flash lit the prairie for miles around, and



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showed the trail winding like a black serpent across the dun plain. The priest's house, black windowed and wetly glittering, flashed out as she passed by. She thought she saw a white face peering through the window. Another blaze of fire and the corral came into view, with old Spot, the bell cow, standing tail to wind, head over the fence.

A bolt flared from the sky and struck the ground at her feet. The air filled with sulphurous fumes, and she was momentarily blinded and half stunned by the concussion. A lull, almost a silence, followed, then the voices of the storm—the pattering rain, the moaning wind, the rustling trees, and the splashing water—resumed their interrupted song. When the flickering light again illumed the prairie, old Spot lay dead in the midst of a dozen of her progeny.

May moved on. For one brief second, deathlessly still to the eye, though trees, shrubs, and grass were in violent motion, the great valley uncovered before her; then she turned the bend and headed for Glen Cameron's cabin.

The rain beat heavily on the sod roof of Glen's shanty, finding its way through in several places. On a rude bunk, fashioned from poplar poles, lay the owner, trying, in tobacco, to find surcease from

## A SLIP OF THE NOOSE

mental pain. A brass lantern swung from the low roof above his head. Across the building ran a couple of heavy logs dividing house from stable, and behind them stood Glen's horse. The rain dripped into the stall, but the man had covered the beast with his own blanket; and now, as he smoked, he listened to the brute's contented munch and was grateful for the companionship.

Suddenly the beast stopped eating. Raising his head, he whinnied loudly. A faint answer rose above the roar of the storm. Glen sprang up and seized the lantern, but before he reached the door the latch clicked, and a score of men filed in and surrounded him. He glanced round the circle—L. Angus, Brouleaux, Elliot, Recarde, Brousseaux, and a dozen others. He knew them all and—their errand.

For almost a minute they stood quietly regarding him. At last he broke the silence.

"A bad night, gentlemen!"

"Ye'll fin' it so!" The answer came from behind, but when he turned it was to meet calm and impassive faces. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What can I do for you?"

"You know," said the same voice.

"Oh, I do?" His eyes glittered, his mouth drew

## THE PROBATIONER

hard, his grasp tightened on the lantern. He half swung it to strike, then smiled contemptuously and set it on the ground. "Well," he said, folding his arms, "make it so! Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Look a' here, Glen." The big Canadian stepped to the front. "No *living* man"—with sinister accent on the word—"shall boast that he brought shame to Dupré's girl. Ye'll either—"

"I'll trouble you to mind your own business. And I might as well tell you I'm not interested in Sunday-schools."

"This *is* our business," returned the giant, soberly, "es yer'll soon find out. Nor is this a prayer-meetin' crowd, es yer well know. Mebbe we ain't much to brag about in the highly moral line, but there's some things es is a leetle high for our stomachs. We're here to give yer a chance to do the right thing."

Glen made no answer. His eyes looked over their heads, a smile was on his lips, his face the very incarnation of obstinate resolve. Out of the corner of his mouth trickled a streak of blood where the strong tooth had bitten through the lip.

"This thick in hees head Scotchman," muttered Brousseaux, beneath his breath. "Strong, straight,

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an' han'some"—he surveyed the figure with covert admiration—"a devil's temper, an ill man to meddle with—alone!"

"Ye kin take five minutes to consider the proposition."

Dead silence fell in the hut. Even the horse ceased his stamping, and looked on with shining eyes. Outside, the thunder rolled and growled, fitful flashes lit the prairie to the sky-line, the rain beat against the window and swept in glittering lines through the open door. Five minutes passed away.

"Will yer marry the girl?"

"No!"

The men closed in.

Meanwhile May Dupré splashed on through mud and mire. Never since the Red River flood had so much rain fallen in one night. The trails were running rivers, an inch of water covered the prairie, the lightning flashed back from the surface of an inland sea; yet, drenched, with hair flying loose around bare neck and arms, like some water-kelpie, she pressed forward. Occasionally she stopped to listen, always with the feeling that some one was following. Once a large animal crossed the trail and plunged into the willow scrub. At the foot of

## THE PROBATIONER

the rise leading to Glen's cabin the sound of galloping horses came down the wind. She had just time to drop behind a bunch of red willow before the Pelly men swept by. Angus was in the lead. She got one glimpse of pale faces, ghastly under the sickly lightning, and, like an evil dream, they were gone. Springing up, she ran desperately up the slope.

A light shone through the open door. Then she was in time! Perhaps he had been away! Or—consented. No! Not on such terms! She walked up and looked in.

He swung to and fro, hands still twitching, the stretched rope giving forth a doleful creaking. At each gyration, a black shadow, ominous and terrible, swept across the floor to the opposite wall, driving the snorting horse up in his stall. Black spots danced before the girl's eyes; she leaned forward, paralyzed, her mouth wide open as though to cry aloud, but silent, fascinated by the dance of death.

An uneasy whinny from the horse restored to her the power of motion. She moved, and with the released breath came forth the suspended cry of the agonized spirit.

She flew at the rope tooth and nail, tearing her fingers on the hard-drawn knot without loosening a strand. Despairingly she glanced around the cabin.

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An axe leaned in the corner. One stroke and he was down; then, laying his head on her lap, she drew, with careful haste, the keen edge across the noose. The tightened strands flew apart, and with a hollow sound fresh air rushed to the choked lungs. Taking her wet skirt, she wiped the blood and froth from his mouth; then, pillowing his head on her bosom, she rocked to and fro, waiting in agony for a sign of life.

Slowly the man's soul came back from the valley of the shadows. The lagging pulses took up their beat, and a sigh, faint as the breath of summer, issued from his lips. She heard it. Reaching over, she pulled the blankets from the bunk and made a pillow for his head. Then she got water and poured some in his mouth. He swallowed, groaned; his eyelids moved and opened.

For nearly a minute he stared blankly at the ceiling, a puzzled look on his face, trying to collect his thoughts. Then his eye lighted on the girl. She rose, blushing, and shook her long hair around her shoulders.

"May?"

He sat up and gazed round the cabin, striving to understand. The axe and the severed noose lay beside him, the rope dangled from above.

## THE PROBATIONER

"You—did—this?"

"I tried to warn you," she said, softly. "I—I"—shuddering—"was too late to prevent—"

"After the way I—"

She raised her hand. "Forget it! And now I must go; baby—wants me."

As she turned, Glen got to his knees. He held out his hands, but the obstinate Scot-Cree blood denied him speech. Unseeing, she moved towards the door. A mighty battle, fiercer than the thundering tempest, raged in the man's soul. The old stubborn spirit fought fiercely and—lost. Like the breaking of a flood, a suffocating cry burst forth:

"Forgive!"

She had conquered, and, woman-like, in the hour of victory, surrendered. Returning, she bent over and laid her cheek to his, but, stooping in utter abasement, Glen bowed down and kissed her feet.

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## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST





## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

**N**ORTH of line fifty, the gloom of night follows fast on the trail of the setting sun. The twilight is so short as to be scarcely deserving of the name; and it therefore behooves the traveller to pitch camp while there is yet the height of a good tall man between the sun and the horizon. Let him fail in this and, devoured of mosquitoes, he shall grope in the dark for dry wood wherewith to build his smudge.

A knowledge of this all-important fact caused the Factor of Pelly to turn sharply in his saddle when the last rays of the sun were obscured by a distant clump of poplars. He, with old Sandy and the Beaver, was crossing the stretch of lake and slough which lies between the base of the Pasquia Hills and the sleepy waters of the Carrot River. They were a good six days north of Pelly—far beyond their usual hunting-grounds—but furs had not been

## THE PROBATIONER

coming in very lively of late, and the Commissioner at Garry was a dour man and hard to please.

"Where's the Beaver?" the Factor asked, in rather sharp tones. "And why has he not pitched camp? We'll be eaten alive, and that without sauce, in less than ten minutes from now."

"I'm thinkin'," replied the trapper, "that the red de'il's pushed awa' ahead. They Obijays we fell in wi' three days syn' tell't him a muckle o' queer tales o' these pairts. An' I'm no sayin'," he added, gazing suspiciously around, "that it's no' a fearsome place."

Fearsome it certainly was. The weird wailing of a solitary loon came from the reeds of a marshy slough close by, the night-wind rustled softly through the gloomy spruce, and a distant owl filled the air with his solemn questioning.

Pressing forward at a gallop, they soon overtook the Beaver. The great wheels of the Red River cart had ceased to send north their monotonous complaint—he was waiting for them.

"What's the matter, Beaver? Why haven't you camped?" The cheery tones of the Factor's voice echoed and re-echoed through the dismal swamps and woods.

"No like to camp. Heap bad spirits here. Long

## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

time ago, heap long time, big mooniah kill plenty Injuns, and bad Injuns kill him. All killed, none left. Injuns no like to come here any more."

"Well, push on and camp at the first high ground. Spirits are better company than mosquitoes."

The creaking cart lumbered on into the gathering darkness. Swarms of mosquitoes rose from the long grass, sweeping in clouds against the faces of the travellers, settling behind their ears, and biting viciously. The tortured horses frothed at the mouth and whinnied their vexation; and the dogs gave vent to human-like exclamations of pain and misery, wiping their chops with their paws. And thus they moved forward, a slapping, snapping, swearing procession of tormented impenitents.

A half-hour of purgatory and the cart came to another stop. Before it loomed a large obstacle, which on riding forward the Factor made out to be some large building. He could see the projecting gables dimly outlined against the dark-gray sky; no smoke arose from the chimneys; all was dark, solitary, and silent. A high stockade, from within which came the dank smell of last year's rotting leaves, surrounded the big house: not a light showed, and the melancholy creak of a door swinging to and fro in the night-wind was the only answer to the

## THE PROBATIONER

Factor's halloa. The atmosphere of mystery about the place affected even the animals; the horses sniffed the air suspiciously, and the dogs crept whining between the legs of their masters.

"What place can this be?" asked the Factor. "I had no knowledge of any house in these parts."

"It maun be the auld post," answered the trapper. "Years ago, i' the time o' Factor McKenzie, the Company had an outpost i' thees direction; but they'd a micht o' trouble wi' the Injuns, an' drewed it in. I'd a thocht it wad 'a' burnt doon lang syn', but there's a power o' lakes an' sloughs aboot here, an' I reckon they keepit the fires awa'."

"Well, climb over, Sandy, and chop off that bar. We stay here to-night."

"I'm no exactly likin' the job. The place has aye an uncanny luik." The Scotchman spoke in uneasy tones.

"Give me the axe, then. We stay here to-night, spirits or no spirits."

A few vigorous strokes of the axe, and the great gates fell in from the rotting hinges. The dogs plunged across the open space and rushed towards the building, barking furiously. A hollow echo answered the noisy baying, and they saw within the

## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

old house that which sent them back, bristling and uneasy, to the Factor's heels.

The superstitious Indian made trembling haste towards the getting-on of a fire. He gathered together the pieces of the broken gate, and, bringing forth his tinder-box, nervously chipped away with flint and steel. A spark caught; with coaxing breath he gently fanned it to a flame, and presently, the blaze shooting upward, brilliantly illumined the time-worn front of the old store. It was an old Red River frame, and the plaster was fallen away from the cracks between the logs, leaving it the very skeleton of a building. The shutters were all gone, and the black spaces looked forth like ghostly eyes from the scarred front.

The Factor pulled a blazing brand from the fire and walked over to the open door. The dogs whined as though to warn him, followed him for a few steps, and then ran, howling, back to the fire. He stepped within. A cry of horror and surprise burst from his lips, and he staggered against the advancing Scotchman. The torch dropped from his hand, its last sputtering sparks intensifying the black darkness; but lit up by nature's secret alchemy, all shining with phosphorescence, the awful thing remained in full view.

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Giving vent to an hysterical "Gude save us!" the trapper shot through the door and ran for the reassuring blaze of the fire. But the Factor was made of different clay. Ceaseless conflict with iron forces of nature and incessant strife with wild beasts and wilder men had hardened his soul, wherefore he stood his ground and faced the thing. The door swung to behind him with a mournful creak and shut him in with the dead. He was sore afraid, and breathed faster than his wont, yet moved not nor gave sign of the inward terror. Small wonder that he felt the touch of fear! The blighting philosophy of modernity, which destroys the hope of man while fortifying him against the terrors of the imagination, had not yet laid its leprous hand on the men of the woods. To him the spirits of good and evil were concrete realities, and, for aught he knew, the thing before him might be one of the myriad shapes of the Father of Sin.

"Bring a light!"

The command issued from firm-set lips. The trapper would willingly have disobeyed, but there was in the voice that which demanded obedience. So, fortifying himself with a couple of burning brands, he re-entered the building. The ruddy light of the torches penetrated into every corner

## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

of the room, falling full upon the thing and dispelling its unearthly radiance.

It was the skeleton of a man lying beneath the ladder which led to the room above. Only a skeleton! yet surely never before had human being set eyes on such a frame. The curving backbone rose from between shoulder-blades of unusual width, telling the story of an immense hump. The bones of one leg were shorter than those of the other, the hips set wide apart, and the legs bowed like those of a gorilla. The entire frame was massive and strong, and marked the owner as having been broad, squat, misshapen, and immensely powerful. The skull was that of an Indian, but the brow rose high above the eyeless sockets, denoting an intelligence far above the average of the race; yet with this unusual development were associated local peculiarities which indicated the basest passions. Strangely sinister was the impression conveyed by this last poor remnant of a man, so marked, indeed, as to strike even the dull perception of the trapper.

"The chiel was na' verra bonny," he remarked, "an' it wad pay a man weel tae keepit a twa days' journey frae the likes o' him. An' what's thees?" He had stumbled over something lying on the



## THE PROBATIONER

floor. "Gude save us! eef it is no' an auld ledgy o' the Company's!"

The Factor took the book from his hand and walked over to the firelight. An old ledger it surely was, bound in sheepskin and cornered with brass. The entries were made in a neat, clerkly hand, and set forth the amounts of goods received, the manner of their disposal, and the number of bales of fur despatched to Garry. The last entry read:

*"To Silent Man. to killing that thief Esthahagan.  
1 Musket and 2 Horns of Powder."*

The faded writing carried the Factor back to those old times of trouble and bloodshed, and the persons mentioned passed before him in a long phantasmagoria. He mused quietly over the yellow pages and speculated as to their lives and deaths. M'Garry, the recording clerk, he knew became Commissioner of Garry, and died full of years and honor. But what of these others, whose little lives were just as important in their own eyes and those of God? They also had departed and were as the last year's grass.

But what is this entry on a new page, written in a great, sprawling hand? M'Garry's trim goose-quill never fashioned that splashing scrawl. A

## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

sharpened stick, dipped in soot and grease and wielded by a heavy hand, alone could have produced it. The Factor lowered his head over the page and read on:

"And I, John West, called by the men of the Company Strong John, because of my thews and sinews, being at the point of death, write this, that the men of my race may beware them of the magic of To-wo-bat, the devil doctor. For I see, with the clear eyes of the dying, that my people shall yet inherit this land. From the towns and cities will they come, from the hamlets and the plai ; first by twos and threes, as do the ducks in the springtime, then by dozens, and lastly by swarms, so that they shall multiply and cover the land. And in those days, To-wo-bat and his wicked ones shall vanish from before them, as the rabbits from before the foxes, and the place where they were shall know them no more. Yet, lest he prevail against them while they are still few, will I set down, though with pain and labor, the things I have seen.

"Because of my great strength, which hath always urged me on to rash enterprise, hath this trouble come upon me. Alack, that men should have envied me that which hath been my undoing! But for mine most unhealthy stoutness, I might yet have been tilling the wolds of old Devon. Thus it fell about:

"When but a lad, not knowing the strength that was in me, I was set upon, returning from market, by two stout rogues. They sought the silver, the price of a drove of cattle, and I, thinking to teach them manners of a better sort, buffeted them soundly with my hands. Alack for my unhappy strength! Their bones were all broken within them, so that they fell to the ground and died. And I, being in

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fear of the law, fled to a seaport and took ship for Canada. But these things are past and gone, and I must on with my tale, for out in the woods To-wo-bat dances the death-dance in the blaze of his red fire, waiting for me, even as the snapping wolf waits for the wounded bull. All of his warriors have I slain, and, if he but come before my waning strength is sped, him too will I send after them."

"Sandy," said the Factor, glancing up from the book, "did you ever hear of one John West?"

"John West—John West! Why, tae be sure, I've heerd tell o' the man. He was Factor o' Elphinstone. Strong John, they caed him, for he was main strong o' his hands. They said he went clean daft ower a half-breed squaw, and gaed amissing just afore the Company drewed in the Pasquia Post."

"Listen to this, then:

"Zaar I sent from me under the cover of last night, that she fall not again into the lecherous hands of To-wo-bat. 'Let me stay, that I may die with thee,' she pleaded, not knowing that men kill not the desire of their eyes. But I was firm, and instructed her in the trail to Pelly, and gave her wise counsel that she marry a man of the Company. For she is fair to look upon and would be the better of a husband. And she, weeping, promised faithfully to obey my behests, wherein she set a pattern to women of whiter skins: though, alack! the flesh is weak, and a little less obedience in this matter would have been more pleasing.

"I remember well the day I first set eyes upon her—an

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evil one for Red Mike, the Irish trapper. He had marked her for his own, and I came upon them as he sought to drag her into the forest. Full thirty paces I sent him flying through the air, so said the men that took him up, and his neck was broken so that he troubled the maidens no more. And I looked into the eyes of the girl that day and knew my mate.

"That night I sought the tepee of the old squaw, her mother, and bought the girl with a great store of merchandise. And I would have ta'en her to my house, and Zaar was willing. But the old crone would none of it; she must needs first handle the goods.

"Oh, that I had known it! Without the tepee, his prick-ears cocked to the listening, lay the twisted devil To-wo-bat.

"The next morning I loaded a Red River cart with the merchandise, the price of the girl, and made my way, whistling a merry tune, to the tent of the old woman. It was gone! Of the twenty tepees standing there the night before not one was left.

"I will say naught of the hell that raged within me at the sight, nor of the three days' tracking without stop for bite or sup; for To-wo-bat burns his red fire in the woods, and the weakness gains upon me. It suffices that on the third day I came upon them in the Riding Mountains.

"It was nightfall when I first saw through the spruce the light of the lodge-fires. The drums I had heard long before, and I knew that something of importance was afoot. Creeping on the flat of my belly, I made my way to a place in the brush close to the tepees. It was almost dark, but a roaring fire sent its flames crackling on high, brilliantly lighting up the camp. Now shall I tell of the devil-dance going on around it.

Some twenty Indians, stark naked, with bodies painted black and striped with white, so that they looked death-

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heads, moved rapidly round a post that was set up close to the fire. Their eyes glittered with unholy light and they uttered hideous yells and screams. Long ropes of hide were passed through slits in the skin of their breasts, somewhat after the fashion in which a yeoman strings his bacon for the hanging, and as each danced he threw himself backward, striving to tear away. When one succeeded he ran amuck through the crowd of watching squaws, biting pieces out of the bodies of those he met. At the foot of the great pole stood the chief devil of them all. He was a man of mighty thews and sinews, broad and squat, and a great hump rose from between his shoulders. One leg was shorter than the other and he limped as he danced. His face was painted of a different fashion—bright red, barred with black; the body, a ghastly white. A towering headdress of black feathers rose above him from which I judged him to be a man high in authority. One strange thing, too, I noticed about this man—there seemed to be method in his madness. For all his frenzy, he kept a sharp eye around him and saw everything that was going on. On occasion he stretched his hand forth over the fire and it would leap up flaming red.

"While noting these things, I looked for Zaar among the squaws, but saw her not; nor was she to be seen moving among the tepees.

"One after the other the young bucks tore themselves away until but one was left, and he, from insufficient weight, could not break free. Him, the devil doctor—for it was To-wo-bat—thrust backward with a mighty shove, and set him loose. Then, with a grewsome shout, the hell's crew ran shrieking through the village. He of the feathers watched them go, and then hobbled to a tepee close at hand. I watched him enter.

"A woman's scream! I jumped to my feet, unmindful

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of the watching crowd, for Zaar came flying from the tent, all bleeding from the arm. She was coming in my direction, the devil doctor following fast and gaining on her. Never before did cripple run so fast as this man. He had reached out his hand to seize her, seeing me not, when I took him round the waist. Great God, how strong he was! Never before had man been able to stand before Strong John, yet for fully half a minute the rogue bothered me. Then I smote him so that he lay quiet.

"And now should I, as a wise man, and as one holding a position of responsibility of the Company, have withdrawn with the girl; but her blood was in my nostrils, and I forthwith fell raging on the young men. In my hands was the limb of a tree of the thickness of a man's arm; and with this I slew ten of them, nor smote one man twice. And presently the remnant, being tired of the game, fled to the woods, leaving me master of the camp.

"Six days we travelled to the northward, thinking they would seek us towards Elphinstone. When Zaar was tired, I took her up in my great arms, and so went forward, her arms around my neck, my face laid against her heaving bosom. And in this wise we made for the Pasquia Post, expecting to find there M'Garry and his men. As we journeyed, her rounded limbs resting lightly across my arms, she told me of her father, the Jesuit priest who forgot his vows. 'For my mother was beautiful in those days,' said she, 'though now old and ill-favored. And wilt thou love me still, when I, too, am old and ugly?' And she told me also of the witcheries of To-wo-bat. How he had her in mind for a long time, and but waited for her ripening; how he waved his hand over her mother's fire the night I bought her, so that it leaped up flaming red; and of the spells and incantations which so wrought upon the old woman that, though loath to leave the merchandise, she

## THE PROBATIONER

folded her tent and departed in the night. Also, she told me of his cruelties and wickedness, the like of which man never heard before. "But thou wilt not let him have me?" she finished, lowering her head and looking into my eyes. And I, swearing a great oath, pacified her.

"At night we lay beneath the spruce, her head pillowed on my arm, her sweet breath gently stirring the hair on my brow; and sometimes, when lying thus, I lay awake thinking of the great happiness this savage maid had brought me. It was in one of these wakeful spells that I saw the red blaze of To-wo-bat's fire far off in the forest, and knew that he was not dead. And because of this the next day I bestowed Zaar safely in a covert, she sore afraid for me, and I lay in ambush for To-wo-bat and his men. They came, but the arch-fiend lagged behind. Ten of them passed me by, and but three returned to tell of the manner of the going of the others. Right valiantly they fought, as became better men in a more righteous quarrel, and they sorely wounded me before I despatched them; so that I was in great pain and could no more carry Zaar. This troubled me much, but she was of good cheer because I was spared to her, and bound up my wounds and said—brave girl!—that she loved walking. And t'us on the third day after the fight we came to Pasquia.

"Alack! M'Garry and his men were gone. Not for myself did I care, but for the girl, whom I had hoped to bestow safely until such time as we could safely return to Elphinstone. But she took it in good heart, saying that we should rest here until I was healed of my wound, and then we would make for Pelly, where the good men of the Company lived.

"Were all the men in the Company as good as I? she asked, having in her great love forgotten Red Mike, the Irish trapper. And was it true that we loved our wives

## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

after they had become old and hard-featured? She had heard, too, that when a woman was old, and could work no more, it was not the fashion of the white man to leave her on the cold trail for the wolves to make an end of. Was this so? And I swore, with another great oath, that the thing was truly said, as was most certainly the latter half. Yea—"

The narrative stopped. A puff of wind swayed the branches of the gloomy forest. The young moon, rising above the horizon, shed a red light through the trees, and, glancing quickly up, the Factor co-ave sworn it was the red fire of To-wo-bat. The day was chilly, and he shivered.

"It's no finished?" interrogated the trapper.

"Seems to be. No; here it starts again on the next page.

"Last night I thought I should write no more in the book. I was in great pain, and crawled to a chink in the wall, through which I might see the fire of To-wo-bat. It burned brightly and was come closer; wherefore I know mine hour approaches. In the night I dreamt of Zaar. I thought she leaned over me, as a mother above her child, but when I put forth my hand she was gone, and I knew it was a dream. But I must hurry, for the gangrene hath laid a hold of my wounds and at times I grow light-headed.

"The second night of our stay at Pasquia I was ta'en of a high fever and at times wandered, knowing not even Zaar. And at midnight there came creeping into the fort the three that had escaped me. Zaar called to me, but I



## THE PROBATIONER

babbled on with my maunderings, knowing them not for enemies until they hacked me with their knives. The blade of one sank deep into my arm. Whether it was the blood-letting or the sight of Zaar in the grasp of another I know not; she had sought to throw herself between them and me, and in the struggle her robe was torn from her. But none lived to tell of her loveliness. The head of one I shattered with my fist, the second I took up by the feet, and, using him clubwise, killed the third. This last rogue told us before he died that To-wo-bat lingered out in the woods, having no stomach for a second encounter. They also had no liking for the work, but he made great incantation before them, and showed them a black glass wherein they could see me lying sore and helpless; and thus encouraged, they came on.

"There remains little to tell. Zaar—something moves below—"

"Take a light, Sandy. I must see what is upstairs in the old house."

The trapper pulled a couple of blazing brands from the fire and followed the Factor towards the old store. The night-wind rustled gently through the trees, sighing a peaceful requiem; the door swung to and fro, uttering its melancholy groan, and in the far distance a wandering coyote raised his mournful howl. The dank smell of the rotting leaves rose in the nostrils; all was laden with the odors of decay and death.

"How did this man come by his death?" The

## A TALE OF THE PASQUIA POST

Factor stooped over the grotesque frame of To-wobbat and examined it carefully. In the back of the skull stuck a triangular piece of rusted steel.

"Look here, Sandy. He was killed as he mounted the ladder."

"I reckon that wee bit of iron cam' from thees?" He held up a rusted hatchet, the top corner of which was missing.

"An' 'twas but a 'prentice hand that strake the blow," he added, as they climbed the ladder.

The light of the torches flashed to the far corners of the old garret. There, to the right, lay that which they had come to see—the last remnant of the stout Factor of Elphinstone, and beside him, her arms about the body of the man she loved, Zaar.

The Factor uncovered his head, and stood silently musing beside the dead. The voice of the trapper broke in upon his meditations.

"She was no' sa obedient as he thocht for. Weemen are kittle cattle; there's nae tellin' what rig they're up till. An' I'm no' sayin'," he added, "but that's what maks us luvè them."

"The



MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT



## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

### I

**F**ROZEN drift levelled the twin ruts of Bad Man's Trail, making heavy going for the sheriff of Williamette. Here, against the Canada line, the trail traversed a bleak country, devoid of settlement, counting thirty miles between solitary road-houses. It was always lonely, a peculiar highway, the counterpart of the paths which, of old, led hot feet to sanctuary.

Roughly limned, it zigzagged out of North Dakota, cut a wide angle in Montana, then jumped the Canada line to lose itself in the heart of Assiniboia. But such lineal statement contains no hint of the weirdness of that wide traverse—the silences of the Lonesome Prairies; the sand, rock, and coulees of the Bad Lands; the muskegs of the sh-grass regions; the twistings in the Scratchi dls, d.

## THE PROBATIONER

vious enough to suit most of the trail's travel, which rode with an eye open for a possible sheriff. For as yet extradition was little more than a name on the border, and the trail took its name from the "rustlers," horse-thieves, and forgers who rode its lonely lengths.

But, lacking a good extradition treaty, Yankee sheriffs and the Northwest Mounted Police pooled interests, keeping an eye to each other's quarries. It was information from the other side that had brought the sheriff of Willamette a three-days' drive from home in Montana. The telegram said:

"Look out for Bill Walton. Left Wood Mountain two days ago. Heading south for Bad Man's. Remember me when you draw down that thousand."

Bill Walton was a cow-puncher of the Lazy Q outfit, who had invited his fellows to dine with the general manager of a transcontinental road. The invitation had come in this wise:

Having eaten something that disagreed with him, the manager, a dyspeptic Easterner, stopped his train at a small station where the Lazy Q was entraining cattle, to relieve his feelings by "jerking up" the agent. But the agent was popular with the Lazy Q. A heavy hand suddenly dropped on

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

the magnate's back, driving the breath from his body, while a hoarse voice familiarly accosted him.

"You're looking real well, Sammy. We got your telegram, an' we'll be right glad to take dinner with you, me an' my friends!"

The magnate did not remember the invitation, but, outwardly meek and inwardly raging, he sat for two long hours and watched the Lazy Q prop dusty heels on his white napery while it swilled his costly wines.

"You're a wolf, Sammy," Walton said, at parting. "Come out to the range some day an' howl with us. An' whensoever you're feeling dry going through this burg, jest dismount an' chalk up three fingers to Bill Walton."

The outfit's parting volley brought down five hundred dollars' worth of glass and costly fixtures, and here, in the old days, the incident would have closed. But in Montana mining and commercial interests were beginning to overshadow the cattle business. Traders and miners had long been clamoring for law and order, and now, owing to his loquacity in the matter of names, the storm centred on Bill. Out of his own pocket the magnate offered a reward of a thousand dollars for his arrest; and so, like the scapegoat of old, he bore his sins and those of the Lazy Q over the border.



## THE PROBATIONER

Wood Mountain, where the sharp-eyed Canadian policeman had recognized the cow-puncher, lay a day's ride north of the border, and the sheriff had expected to intercept his man on his second day out; but this was the evening of the third, and another hour would bring him to his destination, a road-house on the border—a stopping-place of doubtful reputation, built astraddle the line, so that a man might roll from one country into the other and evade arrest with a minimum of disturbance to his slumbers.

Dusk, chill and mysterious, shrouded the vast snowscape while he was still driving, and a huge moon sailed up from behind a spectral butte, the ghost of a hill. By its light the sheriff saw the road-house, a low sod building, rise like a ragged reef from white, wintry billows. In the moon radiance it looked like an enormous reptile, some huge amphibian at rest on the bosom of a weird planetary sea; nor was the resemblance destroyed when, at the sheriff's knock, the door opened like a huge black mouth and vomited the keeper.

Recognizing his visitor, the man, a black-browed French Canadian, vouchsafed the effusive welcome which was born of the knowledge that his house was empty. Also he entered voluble denials when

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

the sheriff inquired for Walton, saying that he had had no stoppers for more than a week.

"Well," the sheriff commented, as the other took his horse, "if he doesn't come to-morrow I'll strike for home, for I promised the girls sure that I'd be back for Christmas. But let's have no tricks, Louis—spurs on the threshold, or that sort of thing!"

"M'sieu?" the man exclaimed.

Grinning at his injured innocence, the sheriff stepped in-doors, where the keeper's wife, a slatternly half-breed woman, was already at work on his supper. While he was eating the keeper came in, remarking, as he hung up his lantern, that the moon was clouded over and that it would storm before morning.

Midnight brought fulfilment of his prophecy. It was a mighty wind. It poured over the road-house, forcing jets of snow, fine as steam, in through every cranny. Awaking, the sheriff found himself sleeping under a drift, and after one glance out at the wild flurries he concluded not to travel that day.

But noon brought him a change of mind. He came hurrying through the drift from the stable, where he had gone to curry his horse, and thrust his open hand beneath the keeper's nose. On his palm lay a locket, a gilt bauble such as swings at the

## THE PROBATIONER

end of a fob. It was open, and from one of its sides the face of a girl, pretty in a coarse way, looked up at the keeper; on the other was graven the name of a man who was wanted in three States for train-robbery.

"Picked this up in the straw behind my horse." The sheriff grimly eyed the other. "Right where it fell when Bat Masters yanked it off in cinching up his saddle. You tol' me there'd been no travel on this trail in a week. How many brands o' lies do you deal in, Louis?"

Shrugging, the man stared at the locket with sombre eyes.

"Before now I have given you the news of the trail, m'sieu—is it not so?" he questioned, hoarsely. "But with this man it is different. A cry is soon lost on the prairies, an' what protection have we of the law? We have not forgotten Blind Antoine, who was staked out hand an' foot in the path of the red ants. He lives longest who talks least. We do not desire crawling deaths."

"Well!" The sheriff pocketed the locket. "It will pay you to talk now. Hit it up, talk off your record, an' mebbe I'll forget where I found this."

The half-promise brought the words bubbling. The man had come to them two days before, had

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

stayed the night, then taken the cross-trail to the west. Yes, he had talked. All summer he had fought with Louis Riel against the red-coated soldiery, but, now that the Metis were gone back to government blankets and bacon, the Canadian north was as dull as a Methodist church. This he had said, swearing that he preferred an American gallows to Canada and prohibition. He was desperate, savage, what of his hard life, and he had spoken most bitterly of m'sieu the sheriff, the man who had shot his brother and broken up his gang.

"Wild as a crazed lynx, he is, m'sieu," the man finished. "He cares now for nothing but revenge. 'He will not need to look for me, this sheriff,' he says. 'I'll strike him where he lives!'"

*I'll strike you where you live!* The sheriff remembered the phrase in a rough scrawl which had come by mail after his big *coup*. He had smiled at the time, deeming the threat as idle as many that had been made against him under the smart of wounds and defeat; but now, as he thought of his two motherless girls alone on his ranch, the words took on sinister significance.

"My God, man! Why didn't you tell me this last night?" he exclaimed, as he rushed out of the house.

## THE PROBATIONER

### II

ON the evening of that same day a solitary horseman reined in his beast while he stared at a group of buildings which had suddenly loomed out of the drift ahead. Three hours ago the last vestige of trail had been blown from the face of the earth, and since then he had been steering by the uncertain wind.

"Story-an'-a-half log house, mud stables," he muttered, in satisfied tones. "That's Lanky's road-house, shore. Billy Walton, you're in luck! Hadn't no right to expect to make it so easy. Put up your hoss, son, an' go to supper!" Without more ado, he rode up to the stables and put in after the free fashion of the country.

But the youth who presently banged the house door did not wear Lanky McDonald's red beard. He was a handsome lad, clear-skinned, violet-eyed; and, instead of flapping loosely, his fringed moose-skins were cut to his figure. From cap to small moccasins he was girlishly neat, and his voice, when he greeted the cow-puncher from the stable door, proved still unbroken.

The treble, so unlike Red Lanky's rusty bass,

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

startled the cow-puncher. Dropping the wisp with which he was rubbing down his beast, he whirled, gun in hand; but his arm dropped as the youth uttered a small scream.

"Why, dinged if it ain't a woman! Pardon me—miss!" He classified her according to her youthful appearance. "I didn't go to scare you. If you hadn't come so quietly, or hadn't been wearing—do you always—" There was an embarrassed pause.

Though intuitively sensing that the question was merely the product of his embarrassment, the girl properly ignored it.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I mistook this for"—he had almost said Lanky's road-house, but he remembered in time the unenviable reputation of the place—"a road-house on the Dakota line."

"On the Dakota line?" she shrilly echoed. "Why, that is thirty miles away! You are in the middle of Williamette County; only four miles out from the town."

The cow-puncher experienced a sudden sinking. He had spent the day skirting the borders of the said county only to find himself in its centre! It was, of course, a common hap. He himself had known men to knock on their own doors to inquire

## THE PROBATIONER

the way in a blizzard, but he had never expected to be so fooled himself. A touch of shame mixed with his alarm. It was chore-time, and any moment might bring the men-folks from the house.

"Begging your pardon, miss," he said, reaching for his bridle; "an' seeing that I've made a mistake, I'll jest move on."

But already the violet eyes had taken his inventory, and discovered the humorous mouth and frank gaze.

"Go out in this storm, and night coming on?" she exclaimed. "The idea! If dad was here he'd pound you for suggesting such a thing!"

The cow-puncher breathed a little easier.

"But your brothers?" he objected, angling for information. "I wouldn't want to take up their stable-room."

"Haven't any brothers."

"No? Who does your chores?" She was plump, pretty, delicate, and well nurtured, unlike the labor-thickened women of the ranches.

"I do when dad's away, but there's not many. We don't farm much, just put up hay enough for bed and feed. An' that reminds me—if you'll do up the horses, I'll run in and get on supper. The pump's round the corner, and you'll find oats in

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that box. Give four quarts to the roan, three to the others, and—come in when you're through."

She had gradually withdrawn her person till nothing but her head projected around the door-jamb, and now it also vanished, leaving him standing.

He was a bashful as well as a modest man, and the thought of spending an evening tête-à-tête with this self-possessed young woman set him perspiring. He had thoughts of saddling and stealing away, but this was offset by an irresistible desire to see the girl again. On entering the house, however, his fear of censure from Mrs. Grundy was set at rest, for a small girl of eleven met him at the door, took his cap and mittens, and seated him in the corner by the stove, preserving the while the dignity of fifty. The cow-puncher felt quite in awe until, after a prolonged survey, she eventually decided in his favor, and hopped to his knee like a bird to its perch.

"My name's Luce," she said, breaking into confidences. "Matty, she's gone up-stairs to change her things, though I don't see why. I think she looks pretty in 'em, don't you? Dad, he doesn't know she has 'em. She only puts them on when he's away, because it makes me feel like there's a



## THE PROBATIONER

man around. We had a Crow squaw in from the Reservation to make them."

Coming down just then, Matty put an end to further revelations. A pretty boy in mooseskins, skirts transformed her into a picture of healthy young womanhood, a girl whose violet glance stirred the cow-puncher. A vast shyness fettered his tongue, and he felt immensely grateful to Luce, whose chatter relieved him from the necessity of conversation.

"I'm eleven," the latter volunteered. "Matty, she's—but no, that's telling! What do you guess? Nineteen? No, she's going on twenty-one. How old are you?"

Learning that he was five-and-twenty, she branched off into genealogical research. Had he any sisters? One? Where did she live? Indianny? Then he would be on trail Christmas, and get no turkey or pudding! Appalled by the event of his calamity, she paused and surveyed him with pity.

"But you don't have to go. You can stay right here an' help eat ours—can't he, Matty?"

Looking up from the biscuit she was rolling out for supper, the girl nodded.

"There, didn't I tell you?" Luce ran on. "Besides, if you don't stay you'll miss seeing dad, and

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

he's awful nice. Sheriff of Williamette he is, an'—  
what's the matter?"

"Spark burned my hand," Walton said.

"Oh, he's terr'ble brave!" Luce continued.  
"Right now he's gone to the Canada line after a  
bad man. There's a thousand dollars reward, an'  
if dad gets it I'm to have a doll as big as myself,  
an' Matty, she's to have a silk party dress. I hope  
dad gets him, don't you?"

It was a most astonishing situation. The cow-  
puncher had experienced nothing like it since he  
broke the Lazy Q backing "four of a kind" against  
a "straight flush," and after the first astonishment  
he felt its fascination. "Terr'ble joke on the  
sheriff," would have summed his thought.

But presently came remorse. Here two nice girls  
were lavishing hospitality on a man who was doing  
his best to bereave them of Christmas presents!  
At supper he felt himself unworthy of Matty's light  
biscuit, and when Luce hopped back to her perch on  
his knee, after she had put away her dishes, his feel-  
ing bordered positively on criminality.

Not that it spoiled his enjoyment of the evening.  
The sough of a storm and the hum of a stove are  
mighty aids in the ripening of acquaintanceship.  
Soon the edge wore off his shyness, and he and

## THE PROBATIONER

Matty gradually drifted from commonplaces to confidences. Both were astonished to find how much of thought they shared. The ideas which filled the round of her lonely days on the ranch had occurred to him night-riding under the stars. Simple thoughts they were, such as are natural to youth when left untouched by city leprosy, but they believed them striking and original as the most pretentious deliverances of the philosophers. So, in this one evening, they came to know more of each other than they could have learned in a month of ordinary intercourse. Matty liked him, and her voice was soft as her eyes when she took Luce from his arms and said good-night.

"You can take dad's room," she said, pausing at the foot of the stairs to indicate a small bedroom that was boarded off from one end of the kitchen. And when he answered that he was figuring on the stable, she exclaimed: "In that cold place? Why should you?"

Hot pincers could not have pulled from him his real reason. He simply answered that he often slept with his horse, and that he could smoke in the stable.

"And so you can here," she answered. "You'll find pipes and tobacco up there by the clock."

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

After she was gone he turned down the light and sat staring into the stove's one eye, which gleamed redly through a monocle of isinglass.

"Do they, or don't they, get that doll an' dress?" was the question he propounded to himself.

The world has known no more chivalrous knight-errantry than that of the range-rider, and the flower of chivalry could not have dropped lance in rest quicker than the cow-puncher answered the query.

"They shorely do," he muttered. "They do—if I get the limit!"

Five minutes thereafter he opened the door and slipped off to the stable.

### III

DURING the night the storm blew out; morning broke fair and frosty. Heaving up from behind the earth's white shoulder, the sun just touched her vast white bosom and set it ablaze with glittering diamonds. Each snow facet threw back a ray; even the air was diamond in its quality. Waking late, Matty listened for a stir beneath, then permitted her reflective glance to wander between the dress she had worn the night before and her comfortable mooseskins. Choring in skirts was distressing.

## THE PROBATIONER

"I've a mind," she mused aloud, "to p  
on. I could slip out and in before he get

"Oh, he don't mind 'em," Luce chirped  
der the blankets. "Said last night that yo  
killing in 'em."

This report had almost decided Matty, bu  
end, comfort vanquished misgiving.

"If he gets up before I come in, you're no  
him out," she cautioned, from the head  
stairs

Tiptoeing down, she paused, large-eyed as  
on gaze, then passed on and out with a sm  
of satisfaction. A foot of new snow cover  
path to the stable, and its white glare forced  
shield her eyes; but the brightness, the crisp  
air, and the pervading Christmas feeling stim  
her till she could scarce withhold a burst of  
But her guest was always in her mind; and, re  
bering him, she compromised on a hum—an  
turning the stable corner, came full on a horse

The man, a tall fellow, had just ridden in  
the east, for his fresh tracks led out from be  
a shelter belt of cotton-wood. Matty's hum  
she stood, staring, fascinated. For she recogn  
him at once. The eyes of choleric brown, the  
cheek-bones, the head, with its salient angles,

oud, "to put them  
ore he gets up."  
e chirped from un-  
ht that you looked

Matty, but, in the  
ng.

, you're not to let  
the head of the

ge-eyed as a deer  
with a small nod  
now covered the  
are forced her to  
the crisp, keen  
eling stimulated  
a burst of song.

ad; and, remeni-  
hum—and so,

on a horseman.  
ridden in from  
t from behind  
y's hum died;  
she recognized  
rown, the high  
nt angles, set

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

forward upon the shoulders like that of a couchant beast, all belonged to the portrait of Bat Masters in her father's gallery of rogues. Only whereas the picture was set and smiling, the sinister lines of the living face were in constant motion, appearing and disappearing, fading or deepening to each change of turgid thought.

"Are you the sheriff's kid?" His voice, harsh and nasal, completed Matty's fright. She could only nod. "Didn't know as he had a boy! Is your dad home?"

She jumped, for the question came out like a shot from a gun; then she forgot her terror. He might kill her, but he should have no information of her father's movements. She neither moved nor spoke when he cocked his gun. A small, boyish figure, she stood up to her knees in snow, returning the defiance of silence.

"Won't speak, eh? Well, I reckon you'll serve in place of your dad. Jest about the size of my kid brother, the kid he shot, ain't you?"

For months the man's soul had turned inward, feeding fat on remorse, anger, despair, and his glance was charged with the deadly hate that distils from such hell-broth. Matty was enduring an experience seldom undergone by one of her sex; she

## THE PROBATIONER

gazed into eyes that were cruel with the ferocity which man reserves for his fellow-man. She realized their menace, read cold murder there; but murder was preferable to another look whose possibilities she dimly felt. Taught by instinct, she prayed desperately that he might shoot while she could still turn him the face of a man.

But even the beasts do not kill in cold blood. There are preliminary growlings, scourgings of sides with tails, and so the outlaw lashed himself with the bitter whips of memory.

"That's what! You're just the size of the kid that was shot with his hands up an' his gun on the ground; shot by your father like I'm—" He raised his gun.

Matty saw the great white prairies heave drunkenly about the sun. For what seemed an age she watched their crazy gyrations; then came a sharp report, and—blackness!

## IV

BUT the shot did not come from the outlaw's gun. Returning consciousness brought Matty the sensation of a cold hand dabbling snow on her brow.

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Looking up, she saw the cow-puncher on one knee, his other hand covering the outlaw. The latter sat his horse, wringing a wounded wrist.

"Feeling better?" the cow-puncher whispered. "Think you can make the house? That's the brave girl! Don't tell Luce—no use scaring her. Tell her I took a crack at a ptarmigan. I'll come when I've finished with this gent."

Until he heard the door close on Matty he kept his man covered. Then he said:

"I allow, mister, that you'd better unlimber from that hoss an' let him walk ahead into the stable. Be a bit pertickler, now."

Following in, he seated himself in the doorway and looked up at Masters, who stood before him, blank, sullen, blood dripping from his wounded hand.

"I'm afraid I've spoiled your shooting some," the cow-puncher said. Tossing the other the kerchief from his neck, he continued: "Tie that up afore the frost gets in, or mebbe it 'll be spoiled for good. Now," he went on, when the other had adjusted the bandage, "let's talk. Sorter poor business you're in, friend, shooting up girls."

"Girls?" Surprise wiped the malignance clean from the outlaw's face. "Before God, partner, I



## THE PROBATIONER

didn't 'now it! It was the clothes. I calculated to get the sheriff as he came out to his chores. He—"

"Just hold your hoss there for a minute, son; this ground's plugged full of badger-holes. If you don't look out y--'ll bust the legs of truth. You disturbed my slumbers, jest before I potted you through the knot-hole, with a brash statement of how your kid brother was shot with both hands in the air. Did you see that performance?"

"No; I was in the express-car. The man told me that was going through the Pullmans."

"Big Dave Reddick, eh?"

A startled oath slipped from the outlaw.

"Who in—what do you know of Dave?"

"I know that he threw you down on that hold-up; that he shot your brother, plugged him through from behind after the boy had turned his gun loose on the sheriff; that—"

"Oh, shore!" The outlaw laughed harshly. "This is a weak hand you're dealing me, partner. Big Dave rode with me out of that mess."

"An' would have served you up to the coroner if his hoss hadn't dropped a leg down to the ground-hogs. Didn't you never wonder how he made his get-away with the posse jest eating up your dust?"

## MATTY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Didn't you wonder why he never joined you up there in the North?"

His quiet confidence staggered the outlaw. "Partner," he groaned, "how did you learn all this?"

The explanation was simple. That summer the cow-puncher had ridden with Reddick on the Alberta ranges, and had nursed him through an attack of delirium-tremens.

"Worst case I ever saw," he said. "Mistook me for you, the kid, an' the sheriff by turns. No, he's not up there now." He anticipated the question. "Dave sober knew what Dave drunk had given away, and he could never bear to ride with me again. Lit out for Mexico early in the fall."

Silence fell between them. The cow-puncher took his eyes from the other's face, respecting its agony. Its expression was indescribable, and may only be approximated by simile. Regret, remorse, longing, swayed in turn; then out flashed its plentiful lines of hate like jagged lightning on a night sky. Then it settled, and the man sighed, the hard sigh of renunciation.

"Partner," he said, "I'd like to know whom I'm obliged to for heading me off from a big mistake. I might have killed that girl. What's your name? Walton? Not the cow-puncher that shot up the

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general manager's car? Shore? Say, this is a funny place for you to be!"

"Darkest under the lamp, you know. The sheriff's up Bad Man's Trail after me, an' I'm here sitting in his stable. He'd have got me, though, if I hadn't taken a notion to come down through the settlements. I was warned at Lonely River."

"Me, too," the outlaw said, "though I stuck to Bad Man's as far as Louis' place." Pausing, he adjusted the bandage; then, with the gesture of a man who knows that he is beaten, he said, "Well, partner, it's up to you."

The cow-puncher ceased tapping the door-sill. "I s'pose," he said, slowly, "that I orter make the people of Montana a Christmas present of you. It would more than square my books. But—I've run too long with the hare to turn with the hounds. Here's your gun, partner. Take my hoss, he's fresher than yourn, an' I don't allow to need him again." The outlaw was about to speak, but he ran on. "Now cut it out an' make a quick cinching. The sheriff's due 'most any minute."

But the outlaw stood confounded, his face suffused with astonished red.

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"Partner," he burst out, "you're throwing away five thousand dollars!"

"Exactly." The cow-puncher grinned. "I feel like Vanderbilt. Breathe on that bit; it's frosty." Undisturbed, cool, and practical, he talked while the other made quick preparation, and gave advice on the choice of trails.

"But you ain't going to stay here?" the outlaw said, as he led his horse outside.

"Shore! There's two girls up at the house that don't connect with Santa Claus if their dad fails to get his hooks on me."

Dumfounded, the outlaw sat his horse.

"I'm doubtful," he said, at last, "that I orter stay here an' see you through. But I must play that lone hand down in Mexico. Ain't there nothing I kin do?"

"Nothing but light out," the cow-puncher answered. "I ain't going, either, to swear you to a godly life or ask you to tend Sunday-school hereafter. I reckon you'll live by the pattern the Almighty cut you on. Jest where train-robbers come in on the plan o' salvation I don't rightly see. Mebbe they're means to abase the pride of godless corporations. Anyway, your time hain't come according to my calculations till you've had your

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chance at Big Dave. All I ask is that you get your feuds straight after this afore you pull a gun. So *vamos* now, an' *adios*, as they say down there."

"There's some," he mused, when man and horse had drawn down to a dot on the snow, "as might think I'd played it low on the Greasers. But I don't love them none since I rode, that season, their borders. An' they're plumb able to take care of themselves. If our friend goes to monkey with their rolling-stock, I can tell him he'd better make sure of his get-away."

## V

AT Tiger Buttes, on the settlements trail, the sheriff received first news of Masters. A roustabout on the Bar X Bar Ranch had seen a man answering to the outlaw's description south-bound on the Willamette trail. Fifty miles of drift lay between Tiger Buttes and the sheriff's ranch, but he made it in six hours, though the beast he borrowed from the Bar X Bar was not much of a horse at the end.

Yet the rider was in worse case. A man inured to wounds and the face of sudden death, he almost fainted when, from the crown of a long snow-roll,

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he saw the stovepipes at either end of his house flinging out white pennons, banners of Christmas cheer. He dared not accept the favorable omen. He staggered from his horse to the door, and there paused, powerless to enter. A laugh from inside caused him to fall back as if from a blow. Suffocating, he raised the latch.

Consternation entered with him. Luce, who was superintending the cow-puncher's labors in stirring the Christmas pudding, screamed, Matty dropped the egg-beater, and the little color she had gained since her fright of the day before fled at the sight of her father's ghastly face. Ignoring her startled inquiry, the sheriff stood staring at the cow-puncher.

"Walton!" he gasped, at last. "Where — I thought—"

Readily divining the cause of his painful agitation, the cow-puncher plunged to end it.

"Yes, yes, he was here, but he's gone, an' no one the worse for his coming. Easy now—you're scaring the girls! Here—take a swallow of this." He poured out a glass of the brandy which Matty was using to fortify her mince-meat.

The sheriff gulped it. "He was here? Tell me of it." And when the cow-puncher finished his modest recital, he exclaimed: "An' while you were

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doing this for me an' mine, I was out hunting the price on your head!"

"Father!" Matty cried, "you don't mean that—"

"Yes, he does," the cow-puncher quietly interposed. "But there's no occasion for you to feel bad. You see I was coming down to give myself up."

But though he lied most glibly, one small witness remained unconvinced.

"It's a story!" Luce's small treble startled her elders. Brown eyes glowing, flushed, she voiced her abiding faith in appearances from her chair by the table. "It's a story! You ain't bad, are you?"

Walton laughed.

"Well, let's call it foolish, little girl. Anyway, I'm the man he's looking for, an' you stand all right to get that doll. Terr'ble joke, though, ain't it?"

But neither girl seemed to see the point, and, divining from Luce's quivering lip and Matty's troubled eyes that a scene was imminent, he used the sheriff's tired horse as an excuse to escape.

A quarter of an hour later, the sheriff joined him at the stable, a roll of greenbacks in his hand.

"Walton," he said, "Matty's told me all, an' it's not for me to put the hand of the law on your shoul-

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der. Take this. It ain't much—a hundred or so, but it's all I have by me, an' it 'll help you along. Saddle the roan mare. She has Hambletonian blood, an' will easily fetch a couple of hundred when you're through with her."

But Walton quietly pushed away his hand.

"Too late, boss! A neighbor of yours, a man with whom I've clinked glasses in Williamette, was here this morning, an' I told him that I'd given myself up. Besides," he paused, "that would be mighty poor business for the sheriff of Williamette, the man who busted up the Masters gang. Compounding felony, ain't that what the law-sharps call it? No, sirree! You couldn't do that sort of thing if you tried. Go ahead an' pull the Easterner's money."

The sheriff, however, was equally obstinate. "No, sir, it would burn my hands. As you say, I'm the sworn servant of the people, an' as I'm not equal to my duty, but one thing remains." He consulted his watch. "Half after three—just time to change an' catch the west-bound freight at Williamette. Will you hitch me the roan mare?"

The beast was tied to the snubbing-post long before the sheriff finished dressing; indeed, he was just getting a "half-Nelson" on his collar when Matty



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came down-stairs and spoke to the cow-puncher. Her voice easily penetrated the thin board partition, and a large knot-hole against the edge of his mirror gave the sheriff a view of her face.

"Please," she said, "won't you go?"

"An' do you out of that party dress?" The partition vibrated to his laugh; then came a sob, and the sheriff saw the tears brimming, large and full, in his daughter's eyes.

"I was thinking—of that," she sobbed. "So—heartless, but—I didn't think!"

"'Course you didn't. There, there! Don't cry."

The hand that slipped out to take hers somehow missed its aim and slid around her waist, and—she did not draw back. Nay, her head lowered, and she cried upon his shoulder. Gasping, the sheriff lost his advantage over the collar. Here was a complication! His mind refused to deal with it until he caught a glimpse of Matty's face; then back rolled the mists of more than twenty years, and he saw his dead wife as she had looked when he asked a certain question.

He deliberately fumbled the latch before stepping out into the kitchen. "Going up to see the Governor," he said, answering Matty's question. "I'll be back on the midnight train." To which, looking at

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Walton, he added, with a touch of grim humor, "I s'pose there's n' hope of you escaping?"

"Nary!" the other grinned.

### VI

ON that particular evening the private sanctum of the Governor of Montana bore such a close resemblance to a toy-shop that the chief executive, a grizzled old-timer, ordered his guest to be shown into a room that should be more in keeping with the State's dignity. But on recognizing the sheriff, he led him back into the heart of the seasonable disorder.

"You have brats of your own, Jack," he said, accosting his visitor by the familiar title of the early days; "but you won't get all that's in it till Matty makes you a grandfather. How is she? And what are you doing from home on Christmas eve?"

He whistled, and his grizzled brows drew down when the sheriff told of the risk his girls had run, but his eye twinkled at the close of the story.

"So the scapegrace refuses to run for it," he laughed. "Well, I don't blame him; as for Matty—takes a little after her mother, doesn't she, Jack? You made a pretty quick business of it yourself, if memory serves me. Now about this business of re-

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signing—you are taking altogether too serious a view of it. Anxiety has knocked your nerve, and small wonder. Just ease up a bit till you get your grip."

The sheriff shook his head.

"Now look at it straight," the Governor went on. "If a jury of traders had got the boy after he shattered the manager's dignity, he might have taken the limit, but now the affair is regarded pretty much in the light of a good joke. Why, the manager told it on himself in a New York club the other day; wouldn't sell the experience for five thousand. Of course, it would have simplified matters if Walton had turned Masters over to you, but I like him the better for it. But let us have no more talk of resignation. You need not shirk your duty. Just arrest Walton, subpœna a cattle jury, and the fine they'll give him won't knock much of a hole in the manager's thousand."

"Look here—" the sheriff began.

"Just so," the Governor interrupted, "but if things are as you think they are, don't you suppose the young folks would like a little to start housekeeping on? Besides"—he paused and surveyed the sheriff with a twinkling eye—"you wouldn't begrudge that Easterner the chance of telling another on himself? Shut up, sir! We

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have just time to slip out and buy that doll and dress before the train pulls out."

Though it was midnight when the roan mare pulled up to the snubbing-post, Matty came running out to greet the sheriff. Her arms were about his neck before he had half finished his news, and for a minute thereafter he stood in imminent danger of suffocation. Fathers there are who would have accepted the cow-puncher's offer to stable the horse, but out of a consideration that had its roots in the long past the sheriff refused.

And coming in from the stable he saw enough to justify refusal.

It was not his fault. Matty had forgotten to pull down the blinds. She was standing on a chair by the Christmas-tree that the cow-puncher had set up the day before, and had just finished hanging the big wax doll to the topmost bough. The cow-puncher was handing her the bolt of silk.

"Just enough for a wedding-dress," he said.

The sheriff did not hear the words, but he saw the look, and—considerately turned his back.

THE END